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## SEALSKIN SAM THE SPARKLER

### OR, THE TRIBUNAL of TEN.

A TALE OF THE MINES.

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AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS, "ROSE-BUB ROB" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.

#### CHAPTER I.

AT CRYSTAL LAKE.

"HUSH! not another word! They come at last!"

It was a cracked, wheezy sort of voice that uttered the words, in a low, cautious tone; two human heads disappeared immediately behind the clump of low-growing bushes, which afforded concealment for the owners thereof.

It was a beautiful moonlit night, in the latter part of August, upon a rolling stretch of prairie.

WITH A GASP BOLIVAR BULLWHACK STAGGERED BACK AND LOSING HIS EQUILIBRIUM,  
FELL TO THE FLOOR, UPSETTING A TABLE AND SEVERAL CHAIRS.

twenty miles to the southeast of Mount St. Helen's foot-hills, Washington Territory, and in the immediate vicinity of a small sheet of water known as Crystal Lake.

The moon soared high in the starry dome of the heavens, and sent down a flood of mellow light upon the picturesque landscape, and made objects discernible at a great distance. A strong but invigorating breeze swept down from the northwest, and fanned the verdure of the prairie ocean into a vista of rippling billows, bringing upon its wings an exquisite odor of mountain flowers and foliage, which tended to lull the senses into repose.

A hundred yards away lay the silvery sheet of crystal-like water, sparkling beautifully in the moonlight.

Across this lakelet, nearly opposite the place where the two heads had disappeared, was a large modern residence, situated near the water's edge, from the chimney of which a column of smoke could be seen curling upward, so clear and pure was the atmosphere.

Crossing the lakelet, from in the direction of the mansion, came a small row-boat containing two persons—a man and a woman.

The woman was rowing, while the man sat facing her, smoking a cigar, and conversing between occasional puffs at the weed.

As they neared the northwestern shore, the appearance of the twain became more noticeable, from the fact that both were young and handsome.

The fair one who skillfully manipulated the oars was not more than seventeen years of age, and was formed in nature's happiest mold.

She was attired in a neat-fitting costume, and wore a bunch of flowers at her throat.

Her well-poised head was innocent of covering, except for a wealth of sunny hair which fell in ripples to her waist; her face was decidedly pretty—not a face that an artist would go in ecstasies over, but with that indefinable something in features and expression which always interests, then captivates.

The man who sat facing this fair pilot was of good figure, and evidently about twenty-five years of age. His face was that of a haughty, self-willed person, yet there were softening lines about the eyes and mouth, which gave him something of a dignified and noble appearance.

He wore a mustache and goatee, and his hair was cropped close to his head.

His attire consisted of knee-boots, corduroy pants and jacket, and white flannel shirt, thrown open at the throat. A round silk cap, with tassel, sat upon his well-shaped head; a dark-blue cloak was thrown over one shoulder, and a belt at his waist contained a single revolver of the Smith & Wesson pattern, and a hunting-knife.

That the two were not on the best of terms was evident from the scowl upon the young man's face, as the boat glided near the shore.

"You will regret it, Sadie!" he said bitterly. "You will be sorry in time, that you refused my offer."

"I think not, Mr. Lee," the girl responded, as she dipped the waters but lightly with her oars. "I have never thought of such a thing as marrying you, although you have persisted in your attentions. During your stay at father's ranch I have endeavored to treat you with respect, but, as for becoming your wife, it is out of the question."

"I am not so sure of that," he answered doggedly. "Do you know, I have made up my mind to possess you, whether you consent or not?"

"Indeed, sir, you talk very strangely," and a shade of pallor came upon the girl's face. "If a lady refuses a gentleman, that surely ought to end the matter."

"But it does not always. When an honorable man makes a nameless young woman an offer of marriage, the young woman should have the good sense to accept without demur. Do you not really think so?"

"Most assuredly I do not! Because a man comes of a good family, and holds a lieutenant's position in the army, I fail to see that it signifies a girl should throw herself away upon him. Besides, Mr. Lee, I do not understand what you mean by your reference to a 'nameless young woman.' You cannot mean the slur for me without your intent is meant to be insulting."

"I do mean it for you!" bending toward her with flashing eyes, "and it is not insulting you at that. Can you conscientiously refer to your parentage without a feeling of mortification?"

A rift of color swept over her face, to be immediately succeeded by a shade of pallor, which told how deeply his words had affected her.

"I do not understand!" she faltered, allowing

the oars to trail in the water, causing the boat to move more slowly.

"You do understand! You know full well that you are not Bartley Bryant's daughter, and that he was never married. You also know that he has hopes of leaving this vicinity soon, and when he goes he hopes to take you with him as his bride. Whether he knows of your parentage or not I am not prepared to say, but I know that a cloud obscures the brightness of your life—you have a secret, and are struggling hard to keep it. Stop! Do not interrupt me. I know even more. I know that when Bartley Bryant came to this country last winter he found you perishing upon the prairies with a babe in your arms. You he took to his new home, and it was mutually agreed that you should be known as his own daughter. But what became of your child?"

Her face was averted.

It was white. It was rigid, as if frozen in its expression of despair. Her dusky eyes had a wild, appealing look, the interpretation of which was exquisite agony of heart and soul.

"What became of your child?" Lieutenant Lee repeated, malice unmistakable in his tone.

"It died!" she replied. "It was dead when I was found. Would to God I had been dead, too!"

Her words, tremblingly uttered, seemed to indicate that she would have felt a relief in tears, but they came not. The same stony look of agony clung to her face.

He gazed at her pityingly for a moment; then his expression hardened.

"You have been deceived," he said, his gaze wandering to the shore, against which the boat was by this time rubbing. "I had a better opinion of Bartley Bryant than that. Sadie, tell me the story of your past life, won't you, please?"

She shuddered, as if a frightful vision had arisen before her.

"No, no!" she gasped. "I cannot do that—never ask me to do that!"

"Why not?"

"Because—I could not explain to you, nor to any one."

"You shall explain, however—I swear to that! I love you, Sadie, and I am determined you shall be mine. Once I make a resolution, I never rest until it has been fulfilled. I know two things which, no doubt, will surprise you. Firstly, you are married to a man whom you loathe, and you think you love another man—let me see; his name is Walter Bent, is it not?"

She gave him a withering look, which made him feel ill at ease.

"I understand!" she said. "You are even less a gentleman than I thought you were. You have been guilty of intercepting my letters."

"To be truthful I have, in a couple of instances. My infatuation for you had become so great, that I was bound to learn whom you did really love, and what of your past life I could. Pray forgive, for my intentions toward you are of the most honorable character. Procure a divorce from this other man, whoever he may be, go with me as my loving wife, and—I will restore to you your child."

She started, turned whiter, and gazed at him suspiciously.

"Sir! what do you mean?" she cried, reproachfully. "My baby—my sweet, innocent child is dead!"

"You are wrong. The child is alive and well—I can vouch for that; and you can thank me for the knowledge, as Bartley Bryant would never have told you."

"Oh, sir! you are deceiving me. I know you are!"

"I tell you I am not! Marry me—now—to-night—and ere the sun has twice arisen above yonder moonlit horizon, you shall see your child!"

"No, no! I cannot do that! I cannot marry you!"

"You can—you must!" he cried, positively, as he arose to a standing position in the boat. "Child or no child, you shall marry me, and this very night!"

"I will not—never!"

She, too, arose, drawing her figure up to its fullest height, while her face and eyes showed an expression of desperation.

"You refuse to marry me, then?" Lee said, a tone of triumph now in his voice and demeanor.

"Yes, Larry Lee! Villain that I believe you to be, I would die a hundred deaths rather than marry you, or any other man except the one who to me is all in all on earth!" she cried, passionately.

"Then, if you are so positive, let me ask you

to listen: You shall be mine, whether you will or no, and your own acknowledged confession of love for this other man—this Walter Bent—has set the seal of doom upon him. Come, you must go with me. Boys, all ready!"

He leaped toward her, and caught her in his strong embrace.

In a moment he was ashore.

Two rough-looking fellows sprung from the clump of bushes, near at hand, and with cords securely bound the struggling girl, and then gagged her to stifle her cries.

A whistle brought a third ruffian from a neighboring *arroyo*, with four saddle-horses.

In a few minutes the party were mounted, and galloping away toward the mountains, Lieutenant Lee bearing his fair captive in his arms, while he occasionally looked anxiously back, as if fearing pursuit.

But none was given.

## CHAPTER II.

AN INCIDENT AT THE "CREMONIA."

"BOLIVAR BULLWHACK, gentlemen."

The speaker was over six feet in his rough top-boots, and judging from the extraordinary breadth of shoulder and chest, and massiveness of limb, must have weighed fully two hundred and fifty or sixty pounds.

His, too, was an iron frame, that of a Hercules, whom any ordinary man would hesitate to face in a sanguinary battle of strength.

His face, broad and massive, its aspect was villainous; features and expression bore the impress of a coarse nature and of debased passions.

The mouth was large and sensual; the nose was flattened, and bore a seed-wart upon its end; the eyes were small, dark, and possessed of a cunning gleam that but added to the owner's repelling appearance. From eyes to throat the face was covered with a stubble of jetty beard two weeks' growth; the hair was of the purest flaxen hue, and stood in all directions over the unusually large cranium.

Hat he wore none, and his garments were of bark-tanned and greasy buckskin; the belt at his waist was well supplied with weapons.

With a flourish intended to create an impression, he had burst into the "Cremonia gambling and drinking parlor," at Hunki-Dori mining-camp, and stood gazing majestically around him, as if his arrival was a matter of special importance and honor to the *habitués* of the place.

The Cremonia was not the only establishment of its kind in the flourishing young city of Hunki-Dori, but it was by far the most popular and pretentious, catering as a general thing to the better class of the inhabitants, and of the large floating population.

It was a large two-story shanty. The first floor, the parlor before mentioned, was fitted up in a style of splendor rarely found in places of its class in the far Northwest.

A finely-arranged bar occupied a space near the street entrance; card-tables of mahogany, and chairs to match, were scattered about the room.

Half a dozen girls flitted about, engaged in serving beverages to the thirsty pilgrims who sat at the tables, making an attractive feature to the scene, attired as they were in pink dresses, white aprons and caps.

At the further end of the room, upon a slightly elevated platform, was a private box, or open office, occupied by a woman, to whom all cash for drinks or cigars was borne by the waiters.

Such was the Cremonia, as seen by Bollivar Bullwhack. The room was well filled by miners, sports, and here and there a traveler who had dropped in to "see the elephant."

Two smooth-faced, blonde young men, in spotless white duck, presided behind the bar, and all in all, the Cremonia was by far the most elegant place of resort anywhere in the Northwest.

"Bollivar Bullwhack, gentlemen!"

The words of the giant were heard in every part of the room, and caused more than a few of those present to pause and take a look at this new self-introduced customer.

This notice seemed to please the giant, for he advanced among the tables with a grin of approbation.

"Yas! Bollivar Bullwhack am I, me gentle zephyrs!" he repeated, waving one huge fist majestically. "Ther riotous, ring-nosed rampage from Kalamazam—the dynamic dusenberry from Devil's Delight. Out upon a reg'lar fu'st-class hurrah am I, an' ther's music in ther air, you bet! Let me see! Let me ponder! Out

of whose nose shall I tweak the first inspiratin' anthen uv harmony?"

His gaze swept over the sea of faces rapidly, as if he was searching for some particular person on whom to swoop down.

He had not settled the matter fully in his mind however, when he felt a tap upon his shoulder, and wheeled about to find himself confronted by one of the suave bartenders.

"You will oblige the proprietress, sir, by making a little less noise," the mixer of drinks said politely. "We do not allow any disturbance here that may annoy our patrons."

"Oh! we don't, eh?"

The giant stared at the man a moment, as if amazed—then burst into a coarse, barking sort of a laugh.

"Waal! waal! waal!" he snorted. "Ef you ain't a purty plum, I'll cry pea-knuckle! See hyer, my daisy, who sent ye heer ter breathe thet astonishin' piece o' news into my ear? Who sent ye, I say?"

"We receive our orders from the proprietress to preserve order, sir. If you know when you are well off you will keep quiet."

"Thunderation! Did mortal pestiverous galoot evyer heer the likes? Me keep quiet? Whoopee! nix cum a rous, Mary Jane! I'm a snorter, I am—a reg'lar b'ilin' blood poolin' frum Podunk. Me keep still—me, Bollivar Bullwhack? Nary time! Aire ye sure, younker, thet none of these galoots around hyer didn't sic ye on—aire ye sure, I say?"

"I am sure, sir."

"It is well. Did ary galoot offer to insinuate that my voice was ter be restrained from bein' heerd, a deluge o' blud would sweep away every cussed shanty in Hunki-Dori Gulch. Be gone, my baby, an' set up the swill fer every fu'st-class hog in the sty, fer Bollivar Bullwhack aire a screamer, an' every one drinks at his expense. Arise, ye thirsty Bedouins, an' put yer suspenders to the bar. It's Bullwhack as aire treatin'—Bollivar Bullwhack, the bumstiferous bouncer, an' he who refuseth to slobber, he's got ter fight, you bet—f-i-g-h-t, fight!"

And, turning to the bar, the "holy terror" slapped down a gold piece of large denomination.

Nothing more was wanted by the majority of the *habitudes* of the Cremonia. If Mr. Bullwhack had "the tin" to pay for the beverage, it surely was becoming in them to have the grace to drink with him, and they forthwith ranged themselves along the bar.

But a few failed to do so, and these were mostly strangers in the town, and the waiter-girls of the place.

"Come along up hyer, gals! You've got ter smile wi' yer uncle!" the giant cried, seizing one of them by the arm. "No mulishness' bout this hyer funeral!"

"Oh, sir, please let me go!" cried the terrified girl. "I do not drink, sir—really you must excuse me, sir!"

"Ho! ho! ho! not much, me yaller-spangled canary! You've got ter sip mountain-dew with the beautiful bouncer o' Brimstone, an' 'tain't no 'arthly use o' yer sayin' nay. Here ye go!"

And with a dextrous move, the giant seized the girl and sat her upon his left arm, while he stepped to the bar to procure his drink.

He had not time to raise it to his lips, however, when he was seized by one ear and wheeled abruptly around!

"Put that young lady on the floor, sir!" a stern, authoritative voice commanded, and Bullwhack found confronting him a man of most extraordinary appearance.

He stood five feet ten in his boots, and was well formed in every part. His face was a strikingly clear-cut and handsome one, with a full, pleasant mouth, shaded by a brown mustache, waxed straight out from the lip; piercing hazel eyes, and dark-brown hair that waved back from his forehead to below the shoulders.

A round sealskin cap surmounted his head, and a sealskin ulster of the choicest fur reached below his boot-tops, concealing the character of his undergarments.

His hands were small and shapely, and gloved with a faultless nicety in brown kid, and in his right hand he sported a formidable ebony or lignum-vitae walking-stick, headed with a huge nugget of solid gold.

Of a decidedly sportive appearance, he was at the same time a person apt to command respect from the men, and admiration from the ladies.

His stern gaze was leveled unflinchingly upon the giant, as he uttered the command, and it was plain that he was in thorough earnest.

"Place that young lady upon her feet, I say!" he cried, a second time, as Bullwhack glared at him in savage amazement.

"Humph! who yer torkin' to?" the ruffian growled, fiercely. "Made a little mistake in yer man, hain't ye?"

"Not a bit of it! Once more I tell you to place the young lady on the floor!"

Dangerous was the light now entering the sport's eyes, and the giant was not slow to take note of it.

"S'posin' I refuse?" he leered, his face becoming uglier in expression. "S'posin' I do jest as I please, erbout the matter—what then, me furry friend?"

"Then, I shall *persuade* you to obey!" the sport replied, "and shall not wait more than a couple of seconds more, neither."

"Waal, sence ye aire achin' fer a fu'st-class scrimmage, jest let me apprise yer royal nibs that I'm open fer engagement!" and, with the words, he placed the alarmed and mortified waiter-girl upon the floor. "I want yer ter know, me noble purp, that I'm a-howlin' blood-puddin', b'ilin'-hot, and my name is Bollivar Bullwhack, a biter, a bouncer, an' a death's head, all combined inter one!"

"It matters not to me if you are the President of the United States, or a dozen Austrian armies, or a twenty-horse power Jesse James!" the sport replied, with composure; "you are a big, overgrown, ranting ruffian, and if ever again I catch you in the act of insulting a woman, I'll make you regret the act."

"Oho! oho! what kinder dictionary talk d' ye call that? Mebey ye better git right onter yer muscle, now! Ye cussed low-lived whifset, ye hev hed the honor uv insultin' one o' ther biggest guns o' modern times. I hain't goin' ter palaver wi' ye much—I'm a red-hot ran-tankerous epidemic, a' teetotal annihilation, am I, an' I'm bizness frum spurs cl'ar up ter teeth. So will ye be kind ernuff ter tell us who ye aire, an' where ye cum from, so that we kin hev yer epertaff scratched upon yer tombstone, wi' a rusty toothpick?"

And putting his arms akimbo, the giant squatted, and leered defiantly at his newly-acquired enemy.

The sealskin sport brushed unmelted snowflakes of the crisp November night from his coat-sleeves, ere he answered, and at the same time took a first searching glance about the saloon.

"If it concerns you, or any one else you know who I am. I am best known as Sealskin Sam, or The Sparkler," and he made a movement to retire to one of the tables, but the giant put himself in the way.

"No, ye don't, me Martha!" he cried, with a grin. "You an' me has got ter hev it out, fu'st. I, Bollivar Bullwhack, am here fer blud, an' blud aire I goin' ter hev, you know. So the sooner ye name the way ye want ter die the quicker I'll trim ye out, an' set 'em up fer the boys!"

"Be kind enough to step out of my path!" Sealskin Sam ordered, the fire once more creeping into his eyes.

"Bah! I'm hyer ter stay all winter," Bullwhack replied. "Ye see me, Martha, I don't skeer fer a leg o' mutton!"

Sealskin Sam did not immediately reply, but gazed at the bully a moment; then, with a sudden bound, he leaped forward, and dealt the giant a slap over the mouth with the flat of his hand, the report of which could have been heard in any part of the Cremonia.

With a gasp Bollivar Bullwhack staggered back and losing his equilibrium fell to the floor, upsetting a table and several chairs.

He lay where he had fallen, only for a moment; then he slowly arose to his feet, a sort of bewildered expression upon his ugly countenance.

"That's enuff!" he said, spitting out a couple of tusk-like teeth. "The next time I feel like tacklin' an' arthquake, ye can bet yer sw et life I'll not forgit ye. Good-by! I'm goin'. I'll see ye, when I've chawed off some other man's ear an' whetted up my appetite on b-l-u-d, blood!"

And turning, with a sickly smile, he limped out of the gaming-parlor, followed by a roar of laughter from the spectators.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE FATAL FINGER.

SEALSKIN SAM gazed after him, until he had disappeared, then took a seat at an unoccupied table, and lit a cigar.

Of course he was the center of notice of the *habitudes* of the place, and yet was apparently unmindful of the fact, as he seemed lost in reverie, as his handsome dark eyes watched the spiral column of smoke that arose from the cigar.

Three persons in the room watched him with more than ordinary interest, as if to satisfy

themselves whether or not they had ever before met the man.

One of these was the proprietress of the Cremonia, Mlle. Circe, as she was known—the woman who sat in the little open office, and received the cash from the floor-maids.

To everybody, Circe was a puzzle—a human enigma without solution if such a thing could be.

To-night she was attired in an elegant maroon-colored silk, set off with laces, and true diamonds, which adorned her hands, and glittered at her throat and in her carefully arranged wealth of golden-hued hair.

Her form was one of exceeding grace, and of that fullness which betokens strong vitality, good health and reserve force. Her face was, seemingly, beautiful, but no correct idea could be formed on that point, for from the middle of her fair forehead, to the tip of her chin, she wore a dark silk illusion mask, which effectually concealed the face.

What was known of the woman of queenly bearing, in Hunki-Dori, can be briefly stated.

She had come there, a year before, when hunki-Dori boasted of a population of but ten men, in company with a dark, villainous-looking man named Jack Dean.

He was rowdyish and a hard-drinker, but had plenty of money, and built the Cremonia, as it now stood, and furnished it with a lavish hand.

Circe was announced as his sister, but the contrast between their appearance and characters caused more than one to discredit the relationship.

Hunki-Dori grew, and the Cremonia became the chief place of resort.

One night Dean was shot dead, in a dispute over a game of cards, he being a very quarrelsome person.

After which event, Circe ran the place for herself, and added many improvements, but after the night of Dean's death, she was never seen without a mask across her face.

Dean's murderer, who chanced to be a stranger, had made good his escape, although strenuous efforts were made for his capture.

Circe had never seemed to mourn for her "brother;" and as to her looks, the few miners who had seen her face unmasked, declared that hers was the most beautiful face they had ever beheld.

She was one of the trio who watched Sealskin Sam, studiously, from her position in her office; but if she recognized him, no act or word betrayed the fact.

The second of the three was a man dressed in citizen's garments of superior quality, including overcoat and silk hat. He was a portly individual of good stature, with restless brown eyes, and a huge iron-gray beard that covered the better share of his countenance, and reached to his breast.

He stood leaning against one of the wooden columns that supported the ceiling, and had regarded the stranger with the keenest interest from the time of his entrance.

The third party was one of those peculiar characters, so often described and which is not unfrequently to be met with in towns and camps in the mining and grazing regions.

It was a young woman, or more appropriately a girl, attired in men's clothes; that is, she wore a pair of neatly-fitting gray pants thrust into patent-leather top-boots reaching to the knees, and a hunting-frock of white flannel, the gold-fringed skirts of which reached nearly to the boot-tops. A belt about her waist contained a pair of superior revolvers; the shirt, unlaced at the neck, partly exposed a throat of purest alabaster; a slouched prairie-hat was set jauntily upon her head.

This girl was probably between seventeen and eighteen years of age, and possessed a figure which, while not inclined to robustness, was perfectly molded. She was not tall, but nature had certainly made her a model of figure and form.

No less pretty was her face—a piquant, laughing face, sunny in its every expression, yet with lines to indicate that it could change suddenly to the sternness of anger and resolve.

Her hair hung down over her shoulders in a flossy brown wave, and although there were several very pretty girls among the Cremonia maids, the general verdict was that none could compare with the girl sport.

She stood near a card-table, overlooking a game between two young men, and her position was such that she could covertly watch the side of the face of the man who wore the sealskin ulster without being seen herself, while she also kept an eye upon the game.

In the course of a few minutes some instinct must have warned Sealskin Sam that she was watching him, for he took the cigar from his lips, and gradually turned his head around toward her, their eyes meeting for an instant in a searching glance.

She quickly dropped her gaze, however, and averted it to the card-table, a wave of color leaping into her cheeks, for the expression of surprise and instant admiration that beamed from his magnetic eyes rather confused her.

"By Jove! here's a royal surprise!" was the thought uppermost in the Sparkler's mind. "A veritable queen among women, in the disguise of a girl sport of the mines! Would that some opportune chance might make it my luck to form her acquaintance."

Seeing that she was embarrassed by a consciousness of his bold stare, he returned to watching the smoke of his cigar, giving her only now and then a furtive glance, when their eyes were almost sure to meet.

The two men at the card-table were getting excited over the game, judging by the character of their conversation.

"Curse the luck, I've lost again!" one of them cried. "I believe you are cheating me, Salem Sphinx. I count myself a good card-player, but you have certainly got the devil's luck, or his cunning!"

"If you suspect that I would do such a thing as cheat you, you had best quit playing, Mr. Ashcroft!" Sphinx retorted, his tone decidedly expressing triumph.

"What! quit after you have won nearly all of my money? I guess not. I am perhaps not as green as you imagine, sir!"

"Oh! suit yourself, then. If your money is burning a hole in your pocket, I can perhaps save you from being consumed by a conflagration. What shall we play for, sir?"

He spoke as cool and calculating as if wholly indifferent.

He was a man of uncertain age, this swarthy-complexioned, black-haired individual, Sphinx, although it was safe to say that he had passed his thirtieth year. He had a hawkish sort of appearance, looking just what he was, a professional card-sharp.

Ashcroft was a younger man by several years, and more prepossessing of appearance, although there was that in his face which indicated that he was on the downward road to consumption.

He looked at the cards thoughtfully before he answered the gambler; and taking a wallet from an inner pocket, counted his money, a desperate expression upon his pale face.

"See here!" he suddenly exclaimed, staring at Salem Sphinx; "you have won precisely three thousand dollars from me!"

Sphinx nodded, with half-closed eyes, as he lit a cigar.

"I believe them's the figures," he agreed.

"And I've but five hundred left. Do you know I came to the mines and worked hard for this money, and to-morrow I was to start back for New York, to see the old folks, pay off the mortgage on the homestead, and then marry a faithful lassie, who has been waiting for these two years? Now you see what I have left to go on! I'll either win back what I've lost, and take to-morrow's stage, or will lose what I have got and blow my brains out."

"You're a fool, young feller!"

It was the girl sport who spoke, and her tone expressed what were evidently her candid convictions.

Ashcroft looked up at her with a scowl.

"Of course I'm a fool, and you'd make me a worse one, if I were not capable of resisting the smiles of your baby face!" he gritted.

Salem Sphinx was getting impatient.

"Come, come!" he interposed. "Either put up or shut up! Palaver never pays the spot-painter. Are you goin' the five hundred?"

"Yes," desperately. "Five hundred for the first. If I win I will double it; after that I will double it every other game, till you or I are broke."

"Very well!"

A fresh pack of cards was produced, and each man received his hand.

Sealskin Sam, having overheard the conversation, arose and sauntered to the table, where he paused to look on.

Salem Sphinx gave him a single scowling glance, and then scanned the cards in his hand.

The game was seven-up, and was played carefully and quickly, Sphinx betraying his skill as a player, not only in playing his cards to their best possible advantage, but also in his shuffling and dealing.

Twice the lynx-like eyes of Sealskin Sam de-

tected him dealing himself a valuable card from the bottom of the pack, the act being accomplished so quickly that not one out of a hundred would have noticed it.

The Sparkler was about to interfere several times, but hesitated, for it was really none of his business. If the Easterner was foolish enough to believe he could beat a professional gamester at his own game, he deserved to be "stuck."

At last the game stood tie at six points each, having one to go.

It was Salem Sphinx's deal.

He looked into the flushed, excited face of his opponent rather pityingly, as Ashcroft clapped the pack down on the table, after having shuffled the cards.

"Ashcroft," he said, "I rather like you, and I'd truly like to see you win. Therefore, to give you a chance, you can have the deal, and I'll mark myself three instead of six, making me four to go. If I cannot make four times out of the hand you deal me, I'll give you back the entire amount that I have won from you. That's fair, isn't it, Sealskin?" and the gambler darted a peculiar glance at the stranger, as much as to say, "I know you are watching me."

"I should judge it to be an over-fair offer, provided both parties play an honorable game!" Sam answered, his face not changing from its usual serene expression.

"Ah! do you suppose I would disgrace my reputation by cheating, sir?"

"I believe I heard you remark something to the effect that you would not, a few moments ago!" was the dry answer, which brought a quiet glitter to Sphinx's eyes.

"It's a good offer, Mr. Ashcroft, or my name ain't Placer Poll!" the girl sport cried, laying her hand upon his shoulder. "Here's your chance to git back to your true-love!"

His only answer to her was a slight compression of the lips, while Sealskin Sam wondered if the beautiful girl opposite him had purposely alluded to her title that he might know it.

Ashcroft spoke rather wearily, addressing Salem Sphinx:

"Give me the cards; I will accept your offer. Nothing but my regard for those many thousand miles away from here could tempt me to thus humble myself."

He took the cards and dealt them, his face unnaturally white, his eyes betraying scarce a gleam of hope.

A number of bystanders had gathered near the table, and upon every face was an expression of intense interest.

As Ashcroft turned the trump—which proved to be the four of hearts—Sphinx picked up his hand, and glancing at the cards for a moment, uttered an exclamation of surprise and threw the cards on the table, face up, exposing to view the ace, king, queen, jack, ten and deuce of hearts.

He had four times—high, low, jack and the game—a strange fatality.

"That settles it," Ashcroft remarked, as he shoved the stakes over to his victorious opponent. "It is not my luck to win anything, except by hard labor."

Then turning to one of the waiting-maids, he added:

"Fetch me some whisky, Kitty, I've a little change left," and he arose from the chair and stretched himself, with a yawn, doing it so cleverly that no one suspected his purpose until too late.

He suddenly clapped his hand to his breast, in the region of his heart; then there was a pistol report; he staggered, and falling, a revolver of the bulldog pattern dropped from his nerveless grasp.

Several persons sprung forward with cries of alarm, and he was raised to a partly reclining posture.

"Don't!" he said. "It's no use. I couldn't go back broke. I'd rather die. Tell 'em I tried to lift the mortgage, but luck was against me."

He was silent a moment, his gaze roving around from face to face.

A hush of death prevailed in the room as the *habitués* of the place tip-toed to the death-scene.

"There's something I wanted to say," he said, directly, in fainter accents. "Ye know—ye know there's a band of villains—"

He paused a moment, gasping for his breath.

"A band of villains, clubbed together, sworn to enrich themselves, and protect themselves, to the death, in defiance of all law or order. They rob stages, commit murder—anything to add to their booty. Their main object, however, is to capture this camp, and here make their ruffianly colony permanent, in defiance of any law except that of outlawry. This band now numbers

many of your friends and citizens. Secretly they are on all sides of you. I am not afraid to speak, because I cannot die but one death. Beware of the Tribunal of Ten! Their leader's name is—"

The words never reached the ears of those surrounding him; for the loud report of a pistol broke the stillness, and a jet of blood spurted from a hole in the center of the informer's forehead!

His hand with forefinger out-pointed, which had been raised on high, gradually sunk, until the finger pointed directly toward Sealskin Sam; then it became rigid and refused to fall further, for young Ashcroft was dead, and his whole body had suddenly become stiffened as by a spasm.

A horrified murmur escaped the crowd, as the long, white index finger pointed out the man in sealskin ulster.

Sealskin Sam's face flushed, and he stepped to one side, with an exclamation of horror, quickly realizing the effect the startling occurrence would be apt to have upon the minds of the people.

But horror of horrors!

What infernal mystery was this?

The moment he stepped to one side, the finger crooked sufficiently to still point directly at the man.

A shade of pallor passed over the handsome stranger's face, and he was about to make some utterance when he was interrupted by several voices.

The cry was:

"Stand!"

He looked. He saw that a dozen cocked revolvers were leveled at him by as many stern-faced miners—knew that the accusing index finger, in conjunction with the dying words of young Ashcroft, had been the means of getting him into an unenviable predicament.

"Stand!" one of the party cried, gruffly. "Throw up your hands and surrender, or die in your tracks! Your guilt is too clearly proven for question!"

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### BOLIVAR BULLWHACK MAKES A CALL.

HUNKI-DORI was the liveliest young mining-camp in the Mount St. Helen's mountains, and although its fame had not yet spread afar, it boasted of a population of several hundred people, of the various classes and nationalities which usually gather in mining-towns, and in Western parlance, was as "fly" a city as there was in the Territory.

It was located in the wild, deep mountain gulch, from which it derived its name, and besides its public houses, or "hotels," comprised perhaps three-score cabins, shanties and tents, which were of the most primitive character, with several exceptions.

A couple of paying quartz-mines had been drifted into the mountain, and supplied work for all who were inclined to work. Other mines were being located; a company breaker and mill had been put into operation, and the camp had the usual characteristics of a wide-awake young mining-town.

One main street or stage-road was all Hunki-Dori yet boasted, or was, in reality, all that was required.

Upon this street was located, most conspicuous of all, the Cremonia, in addition to which was a barn-like tavern, a theater, a number of stores, saloons, shops and dance-resorts—the latter generally connected with the saloons.

Then there were the shanties, tents and cabins, two pretentious frame dwellings, owned by the rival "mine kings" of Hunki-Dori—Eben Selden and Maurice Clarkson.

Selden owned one of the opened mines and a considerable portion of the camp, while Clarkson was proprietor of the other mine and another considerable section of the camp, so that between them the two rather monopolized the town's business and property.

Both were past the middle age, well educated, with much business tact, and thorough-going gentlemen to the ordinary observer.

Both were widowers, and, strange to say, had daughters and sons of nearly the same age; but between the two families, more especially between the parents, there existed a coldness, which, while it could not be regarded as a family feud, approached very nearly to it. Neither of the elders spoke to one another.

The reason of this estrangement the good and bad people of Hunki-Dori could never quite comprehend.

Colonel Maurice Clarkson was a tall, slim man, of sedate aspect, very neat of dress, and rather impressive in appearance, with his sweep-

ing iron-gray side-whiskers, and brilliant black eyes.

His son, Leroy, was a young man of two-and-twenty, and although something of his father's general appearance, was of a lively disposition, and by no means unattractive, with his clear-cut face, keen blue eyes and light hair and mustache.

Father and son, in business relations, always worked together harmoniously, and no one would suspect that everything did not go right with the Clarksons—for Bertie Clarkson, the eighteen-year-old sunbeam of the family, was pretty, light-hearted and merry, with never a care upon her girlish mind.

With the Seldens, it was not altogether the same as with the Clarksons.

Eben was a close-fisted, avaricious, grasping sort of man, in one sense; in another, when the act would multiply the dollars and cents in his pocket, he was helpful and generous—a mercenary liberality that is ever and always despicable.

He was a little "sawed-off individual"—as the saying is—"about as long one way, as the other"—with round, fiery-red cheeks, keen, cold, discriminating gray eyes, and a bulging, well-wrinkled forehead.

Sardon Selden was a graduate of Harvard—and was the "dude" of Hunki-Dori. Nothing that money could supply had been spared in his education, and when he returned from college, looking as if he had "stepped out of a band-box," he was set down as the learned man of Hunki-Dori.

It did not take the rugged miners of the camp long, however, to "inventory" him. He was lazy, affected, overbearing and at times so silly as to be voted a first-class fool, by a large majority of the people.

Savoy Selden, was much like her brother, but with a little more genuine refinement, and common sense, and a little less affectation. She was passably pretty, proud, arrogant, and at times peevish—such a woman as no honest man, with any self-respect could endure for an hour, much less a life-time.

On the evening of Sealskin Sam's singular adventure at the Cremonia, Miss Selden sat in an easy-chair, in the cosily furnished parlor of her father's residence, reading from a volume of poems. She was richly attired, and could hardly have appeared to better advantage. Jewels glittered upon her fair hands and at her throat, and she wore a pair of diamond earrings that would have been the envy of a princess.

Outside, the shrill winds of the blustering November night made weird music, but did not concern the reader, for she kept closely to her book, until a footstep near at hand, caused her to raise her eyes.

She started to her feet with a cry of alarm, as she beheld a man standing but a few paces away regarding her with sinister admiration.

This man was none other than the redoubtable Bollivar Bullwhack, and a broad grin swept over his face at sight of the terror manifested by Miss Selden.

"Don't be skeert, me purty goslin'; I ain't goin' ter hurt ye, yer know. I jest dropped in ter see how Eben, ther old rascal, aire gittin' erlong. I heer he's struck it rich sence he came heer, an' I'll swan it's no more'n fair he should give his duterful brother a lift—what der you say?"

"Sir! I do not understand you. You are an intruder here. Begone, or I will call my servant!" Miss Selden cried, imperiously.

"You'll do what?" Bullwhack grinned, aiming a squirt of tobacco juice at a slumbering, snowy poodle dog on the hearth. "You'll call yer servant, did ye say?"

"Yes, I'll call my servant, and have you ejected from the house!"

"Waal, I'll be chawed up an' spit out; ye wouldn't, would ye, now?" and the giant burst into an uproarious guffaw. "Why, d'ye kno', girly, ye actooally make yer uncle sick tew his diaphragm, yeou do?"

"Susan!" cried Miss Selden, sharply, at the same time touching a silver bell, upon the table.

"Yas, ma'am!" came the answer, and a buxom negro girl marched into the room. She was a "heavy-weight," evidently.

"Fse heah, ma'am. What's de matter, ma'am?" she cried, eying Bullwhack from head to foot, with her rolling orbs of black and white.

"Why, yer see—" Bullwhack began.

"Silence!" cried Miss Selden. "Susan, this monster is an intruder here. Put him out of the house at once!"

"Yas, put him right out, kerslap!" assented

the giant with a delighted grin. "I'm jest as gentle an' docile as er spring lamb, an' I mind like a muel, when I'm spoken to!"

"Cum, youh jes' done buckle up an' git out ob dis!" Suse ordered, advancing. "None ob youh back-talk, but yo' jes' march!"

"Nary a march, Susy!" Bullwhack replied, blandly. "Ef yer wanter know et, you blubber-lipped black-an'-tan, I'm ther great an' gelorous Bollivar Bullwhack—a howlin' six-horned hornet—a lively old flea from Flipville, an' thar'll be frost on ther whiskers of the moon ere I budge one squar' inch!" and the ruffian drew and cocked a pair of large-caliber revolvers.

"Help—help!" screamed Miss Savoy, frantically.

"Hello! what is all this rumpus about?" and Mr. Eben Selden waddled into the room. "Well, well, I declare! This is a pretty state of affairs!"

"Lor', boss, 'tain't no state—et's a hull wilage, fo' suah!" Suse ejaculated.

"Yas, an' er hatful o' mountings an' volcaners throw'd in," added Bullwhack, with a chuckle. "My beloved brother Eben, haow d'ye do?"

The capitalist stared aghast.

"Sir-r-r! I do not understand you! What do you mean by intruding upon my daughter's privacy? Explain yourself at once!"

"Thet's suthin' I ken't do. I never hed my intervidual masheenry apart, so as ter be able ter explain all ther teckneral points. Brother Eben, haow d'ye do?"

"Man, are you mad? I am no brother of yours!"

"Ye ain't? Now, that's funny. I thort ye was, chaw me up an' spit me out, ef I didn't! You're Ebenezer Selden, ain't ye?"

"I am."

"Waal, I'm yer genuine prodigal brother, Jerrymiaher, more latterly named by Congress, Bollivar Bullwhack, the beautiful bouncer, from Bungtown—an' don't ver fergit it! So ef ye hev got ary a fattened calf, kill it instanter. Ef ye hain't got a calf, kill that durned blubber-lipped nigger wench!"

"Oh, jes' you wait!" Suse cried. "If dis chile don't get eben wid you, dar'll be somethin' funny!"

"There is a mistake here!" Eben Selden cried, angrily. "You are not my brother, sir! I never had a brother. You are a coarse, ruffianly impostor, and I command you to leave my house!"

"Not ef ther legislatur' knows herself, Eben, dear. Thar's no kinder use o' your trying ter shake me, fer I'm all hyer, tooth an' toe-nail, an' I don't shake worth a cent. I did get ruther shook up a while ago, when a nasty sort o' galoot swiped me one in the gob, but that ain't nothin'. I am right heer, Eben—yer own confidin' brother, an' I am heer ter linger, you bet!"

"Father, who is this terrible wretch?" Miss Selden cried, anxiously. "Why do you stoop to have any conversation with him at all? Have some one come and put him out."

"Yas, do!" the giant chuckled. "Fetch in about seventy galoots as hev got weary o' travelin' through this vale of tears, an' hev each one fetch his own coffin measure with him. That's ther idea!"

Then turning to the mine-owner, Bullwhack went on:

"Brother, dear, perhaps yer darter never heard a certain little story o' ther past, that—"

"Stop!" Selden cried, with startling savageness. "Enough of this. I know you now. Savoy, this is your uncle, and you will please treat him with all due respect hereafter."

Bullwhack turned to the astonished girl with a mocking bow.

"Yas, sissy, I'm yer uncle, an' any time ye wanter kiss me ye hev ther undisputed privilege of doin' it—it's all in ther family, yer know. If ye ever make any mistake betwixt us, an' can't tell ther which frum which, jest count ther warts on our noses—Ebenezer's an' mine."

Eben Selden stood impatiently waiting for the giant to retire, a venomous glitter in his eyes.

"Come—come!" he cried, with a scowl at Bullwhack's speech. "I want to see you in my private room."

"All right, Eby! Lead ther way, and I'm with ye. I'spose you've got suthin' good in ther way o' moisture, up thar?"

"Certainly! Come!"

The giant skipped forward with surprising agility, locked arms with the miner, and the two left the parlor together.

Savoy stood gazing after them with dilated eyes, her cheeks colorless, her lower lip compressed between her pearly teeth.

A moment she stood thus, a frightened expression upon her face; then—

"At last—at last!" she murmured, and sinking upon the luxurious sofa, near which she had been standing, she buried her face in her hands and wept as if her heart would break.

## CHAPTER V.

### CABOOSING THE SPARKLER.

A GLITTER entered the eyes of Sealskin Sam as he saw the deadly tubes leveled at him, and an expression of defiance swept over his face.

He did not throw up his hands, but stood leaning carelessly with one hand upon a chair-back, and the other resting against his hip.

His gaze met that of the last speaker, unflinchingly.

"In what respect has my guilt been proven?" he calmly demanded.

"Oh, that won't work!" the spokesman of the party said. "You can't play none of your innocence off on us. I want yer ter understand that I'm Lion Lije, the Vigilant Chief o' this hyer burg, an' I'm bizness from the wo d'go.' Thet aire corpus war goin' ter whoop out who war the captin' o' the Tribunal of Ten, only his breath war shet off, an' bein's he couldn't let us kno' no other way, his spirit helped him ter p'int you out!"

"This is all utter nonsense, sir. This night is the first I have ever spent in this camp, or anywhere near it!" Sealskin Sam replied, quietly. "I have no knowledge of this Tribunal of Ten, of which the unfortunate young man made mention. I had never met him before, nor had he me, and I repeat that I know nothing whatever of the alleged party he mentioned as the Tribunal of Ten!"

"Mighty cute denial, my man, but it won't work," the Vigilante replied. "We ain't got much law hyer in Hunki-Dori, but yer kin bet we allus attend ter sech cases as this. Ef ye ax all o' them w'ot's present, I opine you'll git a verdict straight from ther shoulder. Eh, boys? Ther evidence aire too conclusive fer dispute, ain't it?"

"Of course!"

"Sart'in!"

"Every time!"

"Dead sure thing!" were the characteristic replies in a chorus.

"You see," Lion Lije continued, triumphantly, "it's a clear case ag'in' you. Sorry ter hev ter arrest ye, but it are my duty."

"You haven't arrested me yet!" and a determined expression came over the Sparkler's handsome face. "I came to this camp with the intention of minding my own affairs, but an unfortunate circumstance has thrown me into an unenviable situation. However, I do not see that it is necessary we should have any trouble about the matter. I am amply able to prove that I came directly to this camp from Alaska, where I have been with a prospecting party for the season—which certainly shows that I am in no way connected with any band of desperadoes that may infest your neighborhood."

Lion Lije shook his head dubiously.

"I don't keer a cuss ef ye war in Yurrop ther hull year. It has been proven that you're our mutton, and we're goin' to take you. So surrender like a man, or you'll git yer medicine right whar ye stand!"

"Lije Landers, this ain't a fair shake!" and Placer Poll stepped forward. "The stranger says he can prove he has been in Alaska for months past; that ought to be enough to satisfy any one, I'm sure. Ye all know it's been less than a year since ye first heard of the Tribunal."

"You go to thunder!" was the Vigilante's savage answer. "Ye'r allus stickin' yer lip in, whar it ain't wanted, Placer Poll. One o' these days you'll get run out o' camp!"

"Will I?" the girl flashed back. "It will be after your term, you ruffian. Mr. Sealskin, you 'tand game. Ef you want backin', I'm with you, you bet! And the pards of Hunki-Dori know whether Placer Poll can shoot or not!"

"Thanks! I presume there will not be any need of bloodshed!" Sam remarked, quietly. "If there is, the disadvantage will be on the side of the assailants. I don't often indulge in a gory racket, but when I do I always make it a point to come out AL."

"Bully for you! We'll hev a shake on that arter the funeral is over. Now then, Liger, ef you want to distinguish yourself, yer chance is

open!" and the girl sport stood facing the Vigilante, with a pair of revolvers in her grasp, ready for use.

Sealskin had not drawn a weapon, but maintained the same careless position, as if there were no danger menacing him.

"Waal! aire ye goin' ter surrender?" Lion Lije demanded, growing enraged at the Sparkler's nonchalance. "Ef ye aire, ye had better hurry up about it—I'll give ye a pointer on that!"

"I haven't the least idea of doing anything of the kind!" Sam answered. "I am a stranger to you all, and do not wish ill for any of you; but I give you fair warning that if you attack me some of you will have cause to regret it! You have heard me!"

Lion Lije eyed the cool stranger a moment, hesitatingly, for a something in the tone of the last speech implied more than a simple threat.

"Cuss ye, ef ye don't surrender we'll bore ye full o' bullet-holes!" he growled.

"Better not!" was the terse answer. "If I am forced to, I shall try to drop at least a dozen of you myself, although you have the drop on me!"

"I'll save you that trouble," a voice cried in the Sparkler's rear, and at the very word, a lasso settled around him, and pinioned his arms temporarily to his side. Ere he could extricate them, a dozen men pounced upon him, and although he struggled manfully, it was but a few minutes ere they had made him a prisoner.

Three miners lay upon the floor, insensible, and a third had received a knife-thrust that was likely to prove fatal.

"Hurrah! we've got ye, now!" Lion Lije cried, dancing about the prisoner, who, though bound, was only held down by two stout miners. "Ye thort we couldn't take ye, didn't ye? Ho! hc! take that!"

And he gave the Sparkler a slap in the face, with the flat of his hand.

"For shame!" Placer Poll cried, indignantly, while the victim grew a shade paler, from the anger he tried to keep back. "I'll dare you to repeat that action, Lije Landers! ye cowardly brute!"

"Cuss ye, what'll ye do, ef I do repeat it?" Landers demanded, glaring at her. "What wull ye do, ye nameless nobody!"

The girl's fair face flushed, and she uttered an exasperating cry, as she stepped toward the villain, her eyes fairly blazing.

"Have a care what you say, Lije Landers!" she warned, looking him straight in the eye. "I'm enough sight better than a hundred like you, even if I am a waif of the mines, whose real name nobody knows but myself. If you don't want to die before your natural time, I warn you not to cast evil insinuations on my name or character!"

So terribly in earnest did she speak that Landers shrunk back a pace, as if quailing from her righteous indignation.

"Darn ye, ye needn't git up on yer ear about it," he growled. "I guess no one is partic'ler afraid of ye, no matter who ye be!"

"You'll find who is afraid of me if you don't conduct yourself a little more carefully, you shameless loafer!" she replied, in a meaning tone. Then turning to Colonel Clarkson, who had just entered, she said:

"Mr. Clarkson, this ruffian, Landers, has arrested a total stranger, on the simply ridiculous charge of being the chief of the Tribunal of Ten. As he is ready to prove that he has not been near this place for all this year, you will see that he cannot be the real party. I trust you will order his release."

Altogether different was Placer Poll's manner and speech, now, from her usual rough-and-ready style, which caused Sealskin Sam to give her a quick interrogative glance.

"How is this, Landers?" Colonel Clarkson demanded, glancing from the prisoner to the Vigilante chief.

"It's all right, cunnel, an' ther boys will tell ye the same. Billy Ashcroft committed suicide, a few minutes ago—that aire, he shot his self an' war makin' a confession, when some one put his candle out, ye see. I guess no one see'd the last shot fired, 'ca'se all war lookin' at Billy. Billy war tellin' thet he war a forced member o' the Tribunal o' Ten, an' war goin' to speak ther captivit's real name, when the shot war fired. It shet off his wind an' he couldn't speak, but he did ther next best thing—p'inted out thet Sealskin Sam, thar, as bein' ther man. The Sealskin skipped ter one side, but Billy's 'indexer' turned ter him ag'in. I don't know what yer want plainer ner that. We's all satisfied, an' we're goin' to hang Mr. Samuel higher than Haa-man!"

"What have you to say, sir?" Colonel Clarkson demanded, turning to the Sparkler.

"Nothing more than I have said before, sir—that I know nothing whatever concerning your so-called Tribunal of Ten, nor have I ever before until to-day and to-night been within fifty miles of this town."

"What is your name?"

"Sealskin Sam."

"That is not your own name?"

"It is the only one I lay any claim to since I have roamed in the West. If I ever had an another name it does not matter what it is, so far as this affair is concerned."

"Thar! now what d'ye think of it?" Landers demanded in triumph. "Ain't it a cl'ar case, cunnel? Ye kin see fer yerself."

"Who shot the young man the second time?" Mr. Clarkson asked, without answering the Vigilante.

"Nobody seems to know that," Placer Poll spoke up. "Whoever did it was careful to do it so quickly as to defy detection."

"I can throw some light on that part of the matter," and all turned around to behold Circe, the masked proprietress of the Cremonia, standing near.

"Then speak up!" the colonel demanded, giving her a keen glance. "It is a grave affair at best, and if possible, some light should be thrown upon the act."

"I have only this to say," Circe answered, turning her gaze toward the Sparkler. "I know not whether the stranger is connected with the outlaw band, but an instant before the last shot was fired I saw his hand behind his back and a pistol in its grasp. I did not see the shot fired, but should presume it was the prisoner who fired it."

"This is simply false testimony, purposely designed to criminate me!" Sealskin Sam cried, with a sudden fierceness. "Who you are, what you are, woman, I know not, but I do know that you have uttered a most villainous lie! I have not grasped a weapon in my hand to-night! In God's name, what is your motive in wishing to make me out a murderer in addition to the other false charge against me?"

"I have no motive, further than the desire to see justice done!" was the reply. "You are undoubtedly guilty, and should be punished!"

"I am not guilty. More likely it is *you* who are guilty, and are trying to screen yourself, by implicating me!"

"This is not reasonable!" Colonel Clarkson said. "Mademoiselle Circe bears a good reputation, sir, in our town, and no one ever speaks ill of her. As the matter stands, I do not see but what it is perfectly proper to arrest you, until an investigation can be made!"

"If you choose to do so I suppose I cannot object, as I am already a prisoner. I warn you all, however, that I shall not submit to this indignity tamely. If I am not released I will be revenged on those who have proven themselves to be my enemies!" Sam retorted.

"Oh! I guess ye won't hurt no one!" Vigilante Landers declared, with an evil chuckle. "We'll take keer ye don't git nothin' less than a noose around yer neck. Git a rope, boys, an' we'll fix him, you bet, sealskin coat an' all!"

"Hurrah! it's ter be a lynch picnic!" cried several.

"No! no! There shall be nothing like that!" Colonel Clarkson ordered, sternly. "The prisoner shall not be lynched—certainly not until an investigation is made!"

"I reckon 'tain't all jest as you say about that!" Landers growled.

"It is just as I say!" the colonel retorted, with decision. "If a hair of this man's head is harmed before he has had an opportunity to vindicate himself, you will find yourself a dead man, sir!"

The scowl upon Landers's face did not lessen, although it was evident he stood considerably in awe of the mine-owner.

"I jedge no one ain't skeert to death, o' you, 'ca'se you've got a little money," he gritted. "I say, boys—how aire it? Shall we string the cuss up, or let ther colonel hev his way about it?"

The miners exchanged glances.

There was, undeniably, a strong inclination among them to visit peremptory death upon the handsome sport; but there was something that caused them to hesitate.

The majority of the miners present were employees of Colonel Clarkson, and felt rather in duty bound to respect his order and wishes.

"I reckon et's no more than fair to give the feller a show!" one miner responded. "He or ter hev a trial, ennyhow!"

This was a signal for the others to assent,

which they did, until the expression became almost unanimous.

"Ye'r a pack o' fools!" Landers flung at them, his rage and disappointment increasing. "Ye'r a lot o' babies, w'ot is afear'd o' Clarkson. Bah! ye disgust me. Ef ther feller hain't lynched, here's what will take devilish good care he don't escape. Fetch him along, boys, an' we'll lock him up in Jo Roscoe's caboose, an' put a guard over him."

There were plenty ready to assist in taking Sealskin Sam to prison, had he been inclined to refuse to go peaceably, which he was not; so he allowed two of the miners to seize him by the arms and lead him from the saloon without a word of remonstrance.

He was a prisoner, and had naught to do but conduct himself as such.

A crowd of curious ones followed.

A piercing wind of wintry coldness blew down the gulch, bringing with it a few flakes of snow. It was a dark night, but the lights from the places on either side made the way clear.

Roscoe's cabin was but a few doors from the Cremonia, and was the most substantial structure of its kind in the camp, and therefore was known as the caboose; but from bits of conversation he overheard, as he marched along, Sam judged that it was untenanted, because of an existing superstition that it was haunted.

On reaching it, the heavy door was unlocked, and the prisoner shoved inside, the two guards following him, and likewise Lije Landers.

"Hyer ye be," the latter said, gruffly. "Ef yer wanter lay down, the floor aire the best accommodations we hev fer sech as you. Bet yer life ye kin consider it thundrin' lucky ye ain't danglin' to ther limb of a tree, instead."

"I presume I shall be as thankful as the occasion requires," Sam retorted. "If I get free, I'll guarantee to get square with some of this town's interesting people. I'll let *you* feel the power I hold then!" and though he spoke calmly, it was with the intense bitterness of a man who considered that he had been made the victim of great injustice.

"Ye better not brag, or ye may git the rope, afore mornin' as it is," Landers warned, significantly, as he and his comrades went out, and closed the door, leaving the Sparkler in inky darkness.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE TRIBUNAL OF TEN.

The Tribunal of Ten was a secret band of daring villains, none of whom were known to the public at large, yet were alleged to be prominent persons of the camp.

Placards had been posted, signed by the "Tribunal," giving various warnings to citizens, and, also, others, defying the public to capture members of the league, or to break up the brotherhood.

They robbed stages and persons, boldly or by strategy, as the case required; stole horses, committed murder, when safety or personal spite required; forged and counterfeited, or held persons for ransom—in fact, anything, by which to realize pecuniary profit.

It was, therefore, little wonder, considering this existing state of affairs, that the population had come to stand in constant dread of the unknown league of desperadoes, and large rewards had been offered for the capture or breaking up of the gang.

Stimulated by this, a trio of would-be detectives had taken the matter in hand, and attempted to ferret out who were really the members of the dread Tribunal, and where was their place of rendezvous.

The result was that one of the three had been found dead, shot through the heart, and the other two had turned up missing, never to be heard from afterward.

Both Colonel Clarkson and Eben Selden had been robbed on a number of occasions, and it was by them that the larger reward had been offered; but up to the time of Sealskin Sam's arrival in Hunki-Dori, nothing of a definite nature had happened toward the ultimate breaking up of the gang.

Later, that night, when the town was wrapped in darkness and quiet, and the blasts of wintry wind howled a weird dirge through the gulch, the Tribunal of Ten held a meeting.

The place was in an apartment of considerable size, which, from its damp, musty smell, might safely have been judged as being underground.

The ceiling was low, and what light there was, was obtained from a couple of lanterns swung to a beam overhead.

The only furniture of the apartment was a long, rough table and a dozen or more rudely constructed stools.

Stout hardwood doors opened from several parts of this room, but into what was not visible.

Eleven men sat about the table, engaged in drinking or smoking, as the case might be.

Each was dressed alike, in coarse black suits, and all had precisely the same appearance, being the owners of immense black beards that so covered their faces as to completely disguise them. The beards were evidently false.

Each man was armed, and each one wore a slouched sombrero, pinned up at the left side.

Finally one of the men, glancing at his watch, spoke up, addressing his companions:

"Well, fellows, if there's any business to be transacted to-night, let's get at it, as the hour of dawn is not far off. I suppose the main thing to be done is to consider the case of our deceased member, Billy Ashcroft. Letter B, I believe to you belongs the credit of having prevented the informer from uttering my name."

"I had the honor of shutting off his wind, captain!" was the grim response. "I felt sure he was goin' to squeal, an' made up my mind I'd settle his hash, if it cost me my life the next minute. I shot through an open window from the outside, an' no one was quick enough to detect from whence came the bullet!"

"Letter H, you can draw up a resolution, thanking Letter B for his admirable act, in behalf of this tribunal," the captain said, addressing one of the outlaws, who had pen, ink and paper before him. "Now, fellows, the next thing on the books is to consider the probability of young Ashcroft's having taken the precaution to betray us prior to his attempted suicide. It appears to have been his intention to depart for home at once, only for his loss at the gaming-table. Might he not have given us up to some one in the camp for a consideration, with the understanding that no move was to be made against us until he was safe out of the reach of our vengeance?"

"Hardly probable," Letter B said. "If he had done this, would he have attempted to give us away, as he did, at the Cremonia?"

"Perhaps approaching death made his conscience smite him," Captain A chuckled, stroking his false beard. "I have always regarded him as being none too reliable."

"I don't believe he would have squealed had he not lost at cards and despaired. More likely he would have been sure to put himself at a safe distance, had he won before betraying us, had it been his intention of doing so."

"Well, we hope he didn't do us any more harm than is at present known," the captain said. "Now let me see—what else of importance is there to do?"

"I reckon there's a lot," Letter C said, ominously. "Ain't nothin' ter be done about that feller, Sealskin Sam?"

"Ah! yes. I hardly know what to say about his case."

"I doubt if his presence in Hunki-Dori will prove favorable to our interests," Letter B said.

"Ah! then you regard him with suspicion?"

"I do, most assuredly. He's a sport, out and out, and I should judge him to be a bad enemy to have. I've known these dashing, devil-may-care sports to turn out to be very shrewd and successful man-hunters."

"That may all be, but you know of the fate of the detectives who have attempted to nose us out."

"I am not forgetful. They, however, were mere boys as compared with this Sealskin Sam. I tell you, captain, he is a dangerous chap to be let loose around Hunki-Dori."

"Mabe so," the captain said, meditatively. "He struck me, though, as being too fine a specimen of manhood to become a victim of the lynch law."

"We've too much at stake to risk being nosed out by such a sleuth-hound!" cried B.

"Ye kin bet we hev!" chimed in C.

"But we might be able to add him to our number," interrupted the captain, who, it was evident, was anxious to give the Sparkler a show for his life.

"We don't want him here!" Letter H declared vehemently. "I'll drop him myself before anything of that kind shall occur."

The captain looked at the speaker, with a peculiar laugh.

"Valiantly spoken, Letter H!" he said, a twinkle in his eye. "Perhaps I can suspect why you do not favor such an addition; and also why Letter B is so anxious to have the seal-skin sport put out of the way."

"What?" Letter B demanded, rather sav-

agely. "Your knowledge must be very exclusive."

"Oh! it's nothing more than the fact that I saw an exchange of admiring glances between Sealskin Sam and Placer Poll, and I presume you saw the same."

The angry glare in Letter B's eyes did not grow less at the captain's words.

"Maybe I did," he replied. "I don't know as it's any one's business if I did. I am dead in for a vote to see whether the fine-furred spy dies or not."

"It's fair," Letter C assented. "You can bet he's safer dead than livin', so far as our personal interests air concerned."

Just then a door opened, and a grotesque-looking Chinaman looked into the room.

"What's wanted, Chinny?" the captain of the Tribunal of Ten demanded, while all eyes were leveled at the son of Confucius, inquiringly.

"'Melica lieutenee, second dlyision, wantee see captla'n," the answer came, in a comical voice.

"Ah! I wonder what can be the matter?" the captain exclaimed anxiously. "Show him in, Chin-Chin."

The Chinaman shuffled from the room. Presently there was a heavy footstep, and a man entered the presence of the Tribunal of Ten.

The reader will recognize him as Lieutenant Larry Lee, of the U. S. Army.

## CHAPTER VII.

### "A NIGGER, AND A DUTCHMAN, AND THE DEVIL."

"SHIMMINY dunder! vot is der matter, mit you?"

"Jes' yo' squat, quicker'n de roll ob Jordan!" was the low answer, and the second speaker, a lithe young negro, of jetty color, yanked his more ponderous German companion, down behind a pile of rocks with a suddenness that nearly took the latter's breath away. "Sh! jes' yo' done keep dat cheese-hopper of yours close or dar'll be blood on de face of de moon!"

"I haff a notion to smack you mit der mouth oud!" the Teuton growled. "You vas put von stich int mine back."

"Golly! if yo' done had sebril in yo' mouf we'd git 'long heap sight better. We come widin de razzor edge of gittin' ourselves into heap lot ob trouble. But fo' dis nigger's long fo'sightness we'd be in a debbil ob a scrape now."

"Vot you mean?" the other growled. "You pe alvays borrowin' some droubles, mit yourself. Vot ish de matter?"

"Jakey Schackhamer, we'se done got lost, isn't we?"

"I suspectds ash vot we am," Jakey replied, dubiously. "I neffer vas in such a schrape, before."

"Nor dis chile, neither, sure's his apperlation am Nicodemus Slambang. But, we'se lost, an' dar ain't no sorter use fo' to itch our backs 'g'in a rock, an' say 'tain't so. We'se two lost babes, in de woods."

They were, at any rate, two very lively-looking "babes."

The Dutchman was a short, but ponderous fellow, of over thirty-five years, with a red, apoplectic face of Germany's genuine type, reddish hair, and a big stomach. He was armed with rifle and revolvers.

Nicodemus was a lithe "coon," more than ten years Jakey's junior, and being fairly well dressed, was by no means a bad-looking specimen of the colored race, his features and eyes being rather attractive.

He, too, was well-armed.

The strangely contrasted pair had been wandering along through a rugged mountain-gulch, until Nick had suddenly jerked Jakey down behind a sheltering pile of rocks, as before related.

The two had lost their bearing hours before, and also had become separated from a companion, and had no definite idea in what course they were going, although their objective point was the mining-town of Hunki-Dori.

The prospect of night coming on and being lost in the mountains was in no wise consoling, and they had been debating upon the situation up to the point whereat we introduce them.

"Yas, we'se two babes in de woods!" Nicodemus continued. "We'se los' de boss, an' we'se los' de dog, an' we'se done gone los' ou'selves, in de bargain. But dat ain't de wus' part ob it—we am goners!"

"Explain vot you mean! You make me sick!" Jakey growled in disgust.

"Well, I've seen de debbil!"

"Der vot?"

"De debbil. He's stan'in' yander, down de gulch!"

"Got oud! You vos tryin' to foolish me!"

"No—hope dis nigger nebbet go ober Jordan, ef I is!"

"Vot does ter tuyfel look like?" Jakey incredulously demanded, seeing that Nick was, apparently, in dead earnest.

"Jes' take a peep ober de rock, an' take care he don't see yo'!" Nick advised, in a solemn tone. "I done expected dat somethin' would happen like dis. De boss he hab' gone up de spout, an' de debbil hab' come fo' us!"

Jakey hesitated a moment, having become perceptibly alarmed. He made several feints to peep over the rock, but dodged back, protesting: "I don'd vas see noddin'! You vas a shack-ass vot got skeered at your shadow!"

"Yo' anudder!" Nick declared, indignantly. "You didn't look ober dat rock at all. Yo're de biggest coward I ebber see!"

"I vas no coward! I mind der smack you mit de nose!" Jakey cried, and raising his head he took a hasty glance over the rock, but only to instantly drop back, with pallid face.

"Gott in himmel! id vas coomin'!" he groaned, covering his face with his hand. "Id vas coomin'. Oh, blitzen, ye shall pe kilt deader's dot smoked herring in mine bocket."

Nicodemus seized his rifle, with sudden determination.

"Dis yar nigger nebbet gib up, till ole Gab'rel toots de horn!" he gritted. "I tell yer dar's stock in de Slambang fambly!" And, cocking the weapon, he sprung to his feet.

In the next instant he had covered the object of their terror, and his voice rung out clear and distinct.

"Hol' up, dar, drat yo' ugly pieter, or I'll bore a hoel froo yo' as big as a goose-egg."

To his infinite relief, the object in question came promptly to a halt but a few yards away.

It was a strange-looking being, but whether man or devil, Nicodemus was not prepared to tell.

It was a man of rather squat figure, with a head seemingly of enormous proportions, the face being double the size of that of ordinary human beings. There was a broad, flat nose, a tremendous mouth, and an eye at either side of the nose—or rather an eye-hole, for, as the reader must have guessed, the head was a mask of *papier mache*, and was a marvel of the maskmaker's art.

Weapons he appeared guiltless of wearing—at least in the belt that girdled his waist.

He came to an instant halt at sight of belligerent Nicodemus, and threw up his hands as a warning to the darkly not to fire.

"Jes' you hol' up an' stay dar where yo' are!" Nick cautioned a second time. "We doesn't desire to make yo're acquaintance at all, sah!"

"You yust pet your life on dot!" echoed Jakey, venturing to poke his head above the top of the rock. "Bedder you keep avay mit us, or we blay der tuyfel mit your mains. Me und mine frient Nicodemus ve vas bad men, so keep avay mit us!"

"Yas, you'se a bad man, fo' shore!" Nicodemus growled. "If it done haben't been fo' dis nigger whar would yo' be now?"

This quieted Jakey and gave the apparition a chance to speak.

"I say, what's the matter with you two fools?" the mask demanded. "I hope you are not scared!"

"Yo' bet we is, fo' suah!" Nick replied. "Yo' jest keep yo'r distance, or I hope I'se flat-futted if I don' bang away at yo', fo' suah!"

"Oh, go along with your gun! I'm on the square, every day in a week, and my name aire Thede, the Gnome o' the West. So come hyer an' give us yer flipper!"

"No, sah! no flip!" Nick announced. "Don' git dis chile wid de debbil, no sah! We'se goin' to Hunki-Dori, an' not to dat other place w'ot begins with H—oh! no!"

"Why, you young imp o' darkness. I'm no devil! I'm a reg'lar saint on wheels. And, as it happens, Hunki-Dori is my destination, too!"

"Den dot settles it!" shouted Jakey, shaking his fist at the odd stranger. "Ve vas go mit a blace called Brimstone—ain'd it, Nick?"

"No! no! you mean Tombstone!" corrected Nick, with becoming dignity.

"You don't know where you are going, I dare say!" the stranger returned. "I'm going to Hunki arter my little gal rests, an' ef ye don't want ter join us, ye needn't."

"Yer little gal?" queried Nick.

"My little gal Ruth. She's restin' down the gulch."

"Does she look like yo'?"

"Well, I should smile, not! She's as purty

as a sunflower in springtime. Better jine me, you fellers, fer it will be dark soon, an' I jedge that one man wouldn't stand a smell of a show, alone, wi' ther wild animals in these mountains."

Nick looked at Jakey, and Jakey looked at Nick.

"Vot you t'ink?" queried Jakey. "Ve go mit der tuyfel, or got ead up py der vild animals?"

"I reckon we better go 'long wi' dat pusson," was Nick's conclusion. "We done keep our eye peeled fo' any funny bizness, an' run if he axes sp'cious."

"Well, are you going?" demanded the Gnome of the West.

"Yas, we'se gwine!" replied Nick. "Yo' jes' let off down de gulch an' we foller at a 'spectful distance behind you!"

Thede uttered a dry sort of laugh, and strode away down the gulch.

Nick and Jakey emerged from behind the rock and slowly followed.

"Der vas some foolishness apoud dat veller!" Jakey declared to his sable companion in a low tone. "Dot big head vas a dead gif avay. Id vas no human head, und you bet your sweet life on it!"

"You are right there!" Thede responded, turning around. "The head is an old one my father used to have before he was hung. I cut it off, hollowed it out, and wear it as a mento!"

"How you know I say somedings?" Jakey demanded, in startled surprise.

"Because I can read your mind. You are thinking, even now, that I am a detective!"

"Gott in himmel! you speak der truth. I goes no furder mit you!"

"Come on! come on!" Thede cried. "You two have no reason to be afraid of me. What are you going to Hunki-Dori for?"

"To see our boss!" Nick replied.

"Who is your boss?"

"Sealskin Sam! We done got separated from him in de mountings."

"Ah! so Sealskin Sam is in Hunki-Dori? He is one of several persons we want to see. I wonder what brings him to these parts?" asked the Gnome.

They soon reached a bend in the rugged gulch, and there found a mule cropping the leaves from the bushes, and a little child was resting upon a grassy knoll—a bright little girl, between two and a half and three years of age, but rather large for her years, and possessed of a pretty, thoughtful face, sunny hair, and large blue eyes of winning expression.

She jumped up joyously at sight of Thede, but gazed wonderingly at Nick and Jakey.

"I'm rested now, papa!" she said. "I want to go on. Who are these men, papa?"

"Only a couple of persons I met, who are going with us, dear!" the masked man replied, placing her in a sort of hamper on the mule's back, so constructed that she was in no danger of falling. "Now then, come on, boys," and, taking the mule by the bits, he led the way down the gulch, Nick and Jakey following.

"Der vas some fooney pizness 'boud all dis!" the latter whispered to Nick. "Vot der tuyfel vas dot feller doin' mit dot shildt, I vants to know?"

#### CHAPTER VIII.

##### IN DURANCE.

SEALSKIN SAM, as soon as he was left alone, managed to put himself in a comfortable position, and here he lay meditating over the unenviable situation his coming to Hunki-Dori had entailed.

"I doubt if I am known here," he mused, "but it is very evident that the members of the this outlaw gang abound in numbers at the gaming-saloon, and they saw a good opportunity to screen themselves by shoving this confounded unpleasant charge on me. What will be the result? The prospect for me is certainly rather dubious. The gang is a power'ul one, and undoubtedly contains some of the most popular citizens of the camp. I can, therefore, hardly expect to escape the noose—unless I can get out of here and, by keeping shady, burst up this precious piratical party, and clear myself. I would prefer that, instead of being forced to betray my identity, to save my neck from the noose. If my three—Nick, Jakey and Hero were here, I might stand a somewhat better show."

His mind went back to Mlle. Circe.

"She is my enemy!" he muttered. "She, and that infernal Vigilante leader, Lije Landers. If I get free I'll endeavor to give them my com-

pliments. Then, there's that girl who calls herself Placer Poll. If I mistake not, she is more a friend than an enemy to me! One can never tell, however. The best of apparent friends often proves false!"

Outside the wind howled dismally, and the sleet dashed against the single little window up near the eaves.

He could hear the men talking who were standing guard.

There were two of them; the others had gone away, evidently.

The hours passed, and the streets became silent, as one after another the citizens had turned in for the night.

By and by the men outside began to slap their hands together vigorously.

"Cuss my boots ef I aint frizzin'!" one of them grumbled. "A good swig o' whisky wouldn't go bad, would it, Murphy?"

"Bedad an' it wouldn't, at all," perfectly agreed Murphy.

"Then let's slip up to Jim Fadden's and get a horn. The prisoner'll be all right till we git back. I allow he's asleep, an' he's bound, any how!"

And Sam heard them walk away.

"If I were only hand-and-foot free, now," he muttered, "I'd make it lively in here."

The footsteps had but fairly died away, when the prisoner heard another noise that instantly attracted his attention.

It was *within* the cabin!

His eyes had become slightly accustomed to the intense gloom, and he peered around him inquiringly.

It took but a moment for him to ascertain that a dark figure was creeping toward him from the furthest corner of the cabin.

He at once suspected that it was some one of Lije Landers's pals, who had been purposely left in the cabin, and that his object was murder.

"Who's there?" he demanded, sternly.

"Sh! not so loud!" a low voice replied. "I am a friend—not a foe. I am Placer Poll."

Sealskin Sam felt like uttering a shout of joy at this welcome intelligence, but he desisted.

"How came you here?" he queried calmly. "I thought I was alone."

She had reached his side now.

"I entered before you did, and took advantage of the darkness to crouch in yonder corner unobserved."

"I am afraid you have boldly risked your reputation, my dear lady, if not your life. How can escape from here be effected until the door is unlocked by parties on the outside?"

"That's more than I can tell you. We'll have to investigate first. I have with me my dark-lantern!" and she uttered a dry laugh. "I'll release you first!"

She drew a knife and severed the thongs that held his feet and wrists.

"What interest had you in attempting my rescue?" he asked.

"The interest of one human for another!" was the matter-of-fact reply. "I knew you were not guilty, and made up my mind they should not have you. You will have to fight shy, though. The Tribunal is a power, and then, too, you don't know all the things about Hunki-Dori camp!"

Her language was not the slang of the camp.

"One would naturally suppose that I wouldn't want to after the experiences of to-night!" Sam responded as he arose to his feet.

"Yet you do!" Placer Poll said, more positively than interrogatively.

"Perhaps. I must not neglect to thank you for thus releasing me. I am only afraid it will get you into trouble."

"Never fear. The folks of Hunki-Dori don't bother me much. They know I am about the safest kind of a girl to let alone rather than quarrel with. Let's listen!"

They did so.

No sound was heard of the returning guards.

"I don't reckon they'll turn up for a half-hour!" Polly said, shooting the slide of her lantern and letting forth a bar of light. "One drink ain't a drop, scarcely, for them galoots. We'll investigate our prison, now!" Here she dropped again into the vernacular of the mines.

The investigation did not disclose anything particularly encouraging.

The cabin walls were of logs, the floor was of logs, and the roof was of logs.

The place had evidently been built by some man who meant to live in perfect safety.

The door was one great slab, hinged and hung on the outside. Apparently it would have withstood the siege of a battering-ram.

The window was but a small aperture, much

too narrow to escape through, could it have been reached.

"The prospect is dubious!" Sealskin Sam had to admit, glancing at his fair companion. "Do you see any possible chance for our escaping?"

"Not at present," composedly. "I ain't despairin' yet, though. That ain't my way."

Sam suddenly thought of something which, in the excitement of his arrest, had escaped his mind.

"My cane!" he ejaculated. "Do you know what became of it?"

"Yes. Ma'm'selle Circe had it the last I saw of it."

"Who is that woman?" the Sparkler demanded.

"I know no more than that she is said to have come here when Hunki-Dori was but a patch to its present size in company with a dissolute fellow named Jack Dean, who announced her to be his sister. He built the Cremonia. Afterward he was shot, and since then she has run the Cremonia, and has always been half-masked as you saw her."

The Sparkler was silent for a few moments—deep in thought, evidently.

"I must recover my cane if I get out of this!" he said, directly. "By the way, would you consider it impudent if I were to be so curious as to ask you what you are doing in Hunki-Dori in your present attire? I judge that you have not always been accustomed to this sort of life and the associations that are in keeping with it."

"Perhaps not!" she replied. "It is, however, a secret which I cannot explain to any one. Here, I am Placer Poll—a wild, devil-may-care sort of creature—a waif of the mines; a friend to friends, and one whom few men care to insult. When they do—well, there is a way to settle such things, even where there is no law. Why I lead this life, no one has, to my knowledge, ever truthfully guessed. The secret will die with me. I am simply Placer Poll."

Sealskin Sam did not press the matter further—knowing it would be quite useless.

She was one of those many women with a past—a bitter one, perhaps—who could fight her own way in life, and preserve her secrets and her honor.

And yet she was but a girl.

They were both silent several minutes. Deep thought evidently had possession of their minds.

Hark!

Footsteps were approaching.

"The guards are coming back!" Polly said, compressing her lips. "I must douse the glim!"

The guards were coming back.

One of them soon pounded on the door loudly.

"Phat tha devil be yez doin' wid the light in thaire?" Murphy's voice cried.

"None of your business!" Sealskin Sam retorted, reaching over and taking a pistol from Polly's belt, he having lost his own at the time of his capture.

"Be ready!" he added to the girl.

"None av me bizness, is it?" repeated Murphy. "Bedad, I've a mind to give ye the toe of my boot."

"Bah! get out, you Irish loafer. You're nothin' but a Mick!"

"D'ye hear the likes av him now?" the Hibernian queried of his companion. "Faith, an' it's a mind I have to be after goin' in an' blackin' his eye for him."

"It wouldn't do him any hurt, I'll agree!" acquiesced the other man. "We might go in anyhow, and see if everything is all right."

"Nary time, me boy!" the Irishman declared, weakening. "It's nary a scrape ye'll get me into. The devil's imp might be loose, an' w'u'd lay the two av us out."

After that they relapsed into silence.

"A failure. They're too keen!" Sam whispered to his comrade, Placer Poll. "I thought I could get them to open up shop in that way!"

"Little hope. We might as well sit down and take it easy!"

They did sit down, and relapsed into silence.

Thus the wild November night wore on, and there seemed no possible chance of their making their escape.

Placer Poll's brave act was likely to get her into trouble yet!

#### CHAPTER IX.

##### THE DECREE OF DEATH.

THE entrance of Lieutenant Lee to the Council-chamber of the Tribunal of Ten, caused not a little curiosity, for, although he was known to secretly be a member of the organization, he had never before visited the headquarters in

Hunki-Dori, but had confined his connection to another portion of the band known as Division 2, whose principal work it was to operate upon the road.

Captain A arose and extended his hand, which the lieutenant shook heartily, at the same time looking over the crowd.

"Well?" the captain demanded, interrogatively, "what brings you here? Has anything gone wrong?"

"Wrong? Well, I should say so!" and the young man shrugged his shoulders. "What do you suppose has happened?"

"I haven't the slightest idea!"

"I presume not. The fact has been betrayed to my superior officer that I am connected with the mountain band. Consequently I have had to desert from the army, and am now an outlaw in every sense."

The captain laughed lightly.

"Why, that's nothing wonderful. You were really an outlaw before—how much worse are you now?"

"A devilish sight worse. Orders have been issued for my arrest, and you can judge what a court-martial would do for me, sir. I'm a hunted man!"

"We are all hunted, for that matter! They don't seem to catch on to us very lively."

"Be not too sure of your safety. A company of cavalry has been detailed to search for me, and if more is needed they will be supplied. Scouts have also been sent out after me!"

The captain looked thoughtful for a few moments.

"Who squealed on you?" he asked.

"You might know!" Lee sneered—"the one who would have been dead long ago, had I had my way!"

"Walter Bent?"

"Ay! Walter Bent, the sleuth-hound of the West, who has sworn to have my life and yours!"

"How did he find it out?"

"How do I know? He found it out, at any rate, and telegraphed my regiment from Olympia, ordering my arrest. The thoughtfulness of a friend, only, helped me to escape."

"Have you been to the Den?"

"Yes. I traveled a hundred miles more than needed, so as to make the place and leave no trail behind. At the Den another disappointment greeted me."

"What?" the captain demanded, excitedly.

"What could you expect?" he gritted. "The game was gone!"

"Gone?" echoed the captain, in undisguised astonishment.

"Yes, gone! If she is not captured there will be some blood spilled."

"Are the boys searching for her?"

"A couple of the shrewdest. The rest are keeping to the Den for fear of being run down by the cavalry and scouts."

"She may come here!"

"I believe it more than probable that she will."

"Then we will keep a sharp outlook for her. By the way, is there anything more about Walter Bent?"

"Yes. He has, I believe, a commission from the Government to come here and break up this band."

"Aha! that puts a different phase to the matter. Does he travel under an assumed name? You will remember I have never seen more than a photograph of him!"

"He has an alias. It is, I believe, Sealskin Sam, and he wears a handsome sealskin ulster!"

"Aha!" the captain cried, bringing his hands together. "We have the honor of having the gentleman already caged, in our own camp!"

"What?"

"Sealskin Sam is locked up in the strong cabin, and will be tried in the morning, on the charge of being the actual leader and chief of the Tribunal of Ten! Ha-ha!" and he laughed merrily.

"Then he must not live till morning!"

Ten of the twelve men uttered this verdict, in grim, decisive tones.

"Bravo!" Larry Lee approved. "I am with you in that. We've got this devil by the horns, and if we give him an inch he will gain a fur long!"

"What d'ye say now, Cap?" sneered Letter C, while Letter B laughed with sarcasm.

The captain did not reply for a moment—then he looked up, and said:

"I suppose your verdict is law here, gentlemen, and his fate is irrevocably sealed. What shall it be?"

"Not lynch law!" Letter C decided. "It might attract too much attention, and might, also, get some of us into trouble!"

"It can easily be settled!" B assured. "C, you and I will do the job!"

"I ain't partic'lar fond about it, if ye please," C demurred.

"I'll fill your place, then!" Lieutenant Lee announced. "I owe the fellow a grudge, and want to make sure it is paid."

"If it is so decided, we will adjourn the meeting until to-morrow night!" the captain proclaimed. "I beg of you gents, if you do the job, to make no bungling about it that will be a discredit, or in any way implicate any of us in the transaction, as regards our private life!"

The meeting then adjourned.

Half an hour later, two forms, enveloped in hooded cloaks that nearly hid their faces, crept toward the primitive cabin-jail, bent on a murderous mission.

Each man grasped a revolver, ready for use, and other weapons studded their respective belts.

"Won't there be danger," Lee's companion asked, "of pistol-reports being heard? It might give us trouble."

"Nonsense!" was the retort. "The contents of both our revolvers can be discharged into his carcass in a second, and we shall have ample time to get out of reach of detection."

They went on and reached the cabin-door.

All was dark and silent.

The guards were nowhere to be seen!

A suspicion of the truth flashed across Lee's mind.

He drew a dark-lantern, shot the slide, and flashed the bolt of light about.

He then examined the door.

It was unlocked.

With a curse he flung it open.

A glance proved that the cabin was indeed untenanted!

"By all the furies! the scoundrel has escaped!" Lee cried, furiously. "Again have I been cheated of my vengeance!"

"How could he escape?" his companion asked. "Two stout miners were put here to guard the door."

"Bah! the accursed sport is never without money. He has bribed the guards, and they've all skipped together."

"What shall be done? A general alarm should be given."

"Nonsense! Do you want to betray the fact that we were prowling around here? Nothing could be done, if an alarm was raised, as Sealskin Sam has taken good care to get himself well away from here, long ere this. Just let matters rest as they are, until morning. Some one will discover the thing."

They soon after separated, each going in a different direction.

Lieutenant Lee had spoken truly.

It was barely daybreak, when a miner made the discovery of the Sparkler's escape and sent out a general alarm.

In a half-hour the whole camp was aware of the fact that the suave gent in sealskin had slipped beyond their reach—vanished, as by the wave of a magic wand.

The magicians of the occasion, however, were undoubtedly the two guards, Muggins and Murphy, as no trace of those worthies could be found.

The escape excited much comment, and not a little indignation on the part of some, and several individuals spread the impression that Sealskin Sam's escape was all-sufficient proof that he was guilty of what was charged against him—of being the leader of the notorious Tribunal of Ten.

Talk will influence, and as a consequence, as the feverish excitement waxed hotter, it became pretty generally believed that such really was the case.

The one self-important individual of the town, Lion Lije Landers, was in a terrible passion, and started in circulation a paper, soliciting contributions toward raising a big reward for Sealskin Sam's capture, dead or alive.

Mr. Landers then paid a visit to the shanty where Placer Poll made her home with a miner's family. She was not in, but he continued his search, and finally found her standing in front of the office of the Clarkson Mining Co., engaged in chatting with the junior member of the firm, Mr. Leroy Clarkson.

Straight up to the girl the Vigilante chief strode, with pompous mien, and endeavored to clap his hand on her shoulder, but she eluded him.

"Oh! no ye don't, Lije Landers!" she cried, mockingly. "Hands off, if ye please!"

"I'll show ye!" he roared. "I've got bizness wi' you, Placer Poll!"

"Have ye? Then transact it at a proper distance, if you please. What d'ye want?"

"I want you! Et looks suspicous that you hed somethin' ter do wi' the escape o' Sealskin Sam, bein's you took his part last night, an' et becomes my dooty ter take ye in!"

"You take me in, Lije Landers," and the girl burst into a peal of laughter. "With what powers are you vested to arrest me on suspicion, I'd like to know?"

"I'm sheriff, constable an' everything for this hyer camp!"

"Ye ain't nothin' o' the kind. There's never been an officer of the law elected or appointed here. Isn't that so, Mr. Clarkson?"

"Precisely so!" Clarkson replied.

"I don't keer a tinker's darn. I'm ther chief o' Vigilantes, an' this gal is suspicioned of abettin' a criminal to escape, an' I want her. She's got ter be locked up!"

"What! you lock me up, Lije Landers? Well, I guess not! Ef ye want ter know how the Sparkler escaped go find out of Muggins and Murphy—don't come a-buzzin' around me, ye big buzzard!"

"You won't come, eh?" Landers demanded, an evil glitter in his eye.

"Of course I won't!" and Poll's eyes flashed with fast rising anger.

"Durn yer pictur, I'll take ye, then!"

He took a step forward, but hesitated as he saw a revolver gleaming in her hand.

"Come on!" she cried. "If you want yer town-clock tinkered you've struck the right jeweler this time."

"Cuss ye!" Landers gasped, not knowing what to do.

Young Clarkson now interfered, authoritatively.

"You'd better go about your business, Landers!" he said. "The girl has done nothing, and, more than that, you have no business trying to arrest her. So be off with you, or I'll take the law into my own hands and have you put in the jug!"

A dark scowl clouded the Vigilante's face, for he knew that young Clarkson would make good his promise were further provocation given him.

He was one of the most popular fellows in Hunki-Dori camp, liked by nearly everybody, and was regarded by his subordinates as a kind and easy-going taskmaster, when obeyed, but a very ugly customer when any one attempted to be treacherous or abusive to him.

"Tain't a fair shake, nohow!" Landers growled, turning on his heel to depart. "Ef criminals git off this easy, the Lord only knows what will become o' this hyer town!"

He trudged away, evidently with the most intense dissatisfaction, followed by a mocking laugh from the girl sport.

"I had a mind to plug him, as it was!" she declared. "I'll bet, if the truth were known he knows as much about the Tribunal of Ten as any one else."

"Perhaps!" Leroy Clarkson said, absently.

"But, by the way, Miss Polly, you haven't given me an answer to my proposition. Do not say no. This wild sort of life is not suitable for one as fair as you. Adopt the attire of your sex, and accept a home with us, as my sister Bertie's companion. We have all talked it over, and would like to lift you out of the rough world you now live in."

"I can never sufficiently express my gratitude for your kind offer, Mr. Clarkson, for I believe it to be an honest, kindly and considerate one, but I cannot accept; nor can I comprehend why you have taken such an interest in me. I am a waif of the mines, with no other name or past than that by which I am known here. Oh no; I could never think of such a thing as accepting your offer. But, believe me, I am deeply, truly grateful!" and tears came into her beautiful eyes.

"But, pray, consider!" he persisted; "we know you must have another name—must have a past, and very likely secrets that may shadow it; but let all that be forgotten. Some day you might be able to explain. Then, too, were you to become an inmate of our home, I—I—I hope—"

She looked at him so quickly that he left the balance of the sentence unuttered. He was gazing into her face eagerly, his eyes glowing with evident emotion.

"Don't hope," she said, quietly. "I will be frank wit' you, Mr. Clarkson—it is not worth your while. I repeat, I am *very* grateful for the many little courtesies you have paid me—feel highly honored, in fact—but the hope you would have expressed would far better remain unspoken."

"Ah! It is he then, you fancy!" and his eyes flashed across the street, to the office of the Seldens.

"Oh, no!" she laughed, gayly. "Not so bad as that! But, your father is calling you, sir, and I will not detain you."

And, nodding, she walked away, while Leroy Clarkson entered the office, with a moody brow.

#### CHAPTER X.

##### A TRAITOR'S DOOM.

SEALSKIN SAM had effected his and Placer Poll's escape in the manner that people naturally supposed.

He had bribed the two guards.

The idea had occurred to him as he and the girl sport sat in silence on the floor of the cabin.

He had a considerable sum of money with him—why could he not use it as the key to his liberty?

Both guards were probably hard-working miners, who could save little or nothing out of their wages. Perhaps a bird in the hand would be worth two in the bush to them?

"I say, Murphy!" he called out.

"Well, phat is it?"

"Is it cold out?"

"Not a bit! not a bit, me boy!" was the dry answer.

"It's cold here. I'd like to get out and exercise a bit."

"It's tight-rope exercise you'll be gittin' in the mornin', shure."

"Is that so? How would you like to stretch hemp, Murphy?"

"Divil a bit w'u'd I like it!"

"Then how d'ye think I'm fixed?"

"Shure, it's a bad lookout yez have."

"I should murmur! But, ye see, I don't intend to dang'e. How long have you been working in the mines?"

"Thrae months—me an' Muggins, here," was the answer.

"And how much have you laid by for a rainy day?"

"Faix! divil a cent at all, at all!"

"And if you were to remain here three more months, you'd not likely be any richer?"

"Shure, it's sinsible yer're shpakin' now, me laddy-buck?"

"Of course I am. Now, I'll tell you what I'll do. You and Muggins release me from here, and I'll give you each a hundred dollars, and you can accompany me into the mountains to a safe place, where you can remain until you get ready to seek another location."

The two guards consulted together in low tones for several moments.

Here was a chance to make a "stake" that would help them out of the wild West, which they were in nowise loth to leave.

"Make it two hundred apiece; and it's a go!" Muggins cried.

"Very well. Let me out, and the money shall be yours!" the Sparkler answered.

To Placer Poll he added:

"You remain here till I'm gone. The door shall be left open. I will see you later."

She put out her hand, but was silent.

He fancied a tremor shook it, as he pressed it in his own.

"Ther' ain't no shenan about this!" Muggins demanded. "It's square, dead open-an'-shet?"

"Of course. You have my word of honor!" Sam replied.

"Then it's a bargain. Murphy, unlock the door!"

A moment later the door swung open, and Sam stepped into the open air—free!

The guards started back in surprise.

"How tha divil did yez git loose?" Murphy demanded, suspiciously.

"Easy enough. It takes more than an ordinary bed-cord to hold Sealskin Sam, you bet! Here's your money—four fifties each. Now, follow me, for this camp won't be healthy for you!"

The miners obeyed, full well realizing that Sam had spoken the truth.

Leaving the mining-camp behind, the Sparkler strode rapidly away up the gulch, at a rate of speed that made his followers "hump" themselves to keep up with him.

Full an hour he continued on, without pausing, and then stood before the mouth of a small cavern, far up among pines and jagged rocks of the mountain.

"Here we are safe!" he said. "You fellows had better remain here until the search blows over, and then skip for parts unknown. It will be the healthiest thing you can do!"

"How about you?" Muggins asked.

A strange sort of laugh escaped the handsome man.

"I? Why, I shall stay here in the vicinity of Hunki-Dori until the Tribunal of Ten is broken up, and several wrongs are righted—several debts of vengeance paid!"

He had brought Placer Poll's lantern with him; he turned on the light, and they all stepped into the cave.

It proved to be a dry, warm place, and by Sam's direction a fire was soon burning brightly, the smoke escaping up through the crevices.

Sam threw himself down before the fire, and lay gazing thoughtfully into it, revolving, in mind, what had already passed since his coming to Hunki-Dori.

Muggins and Murphy also seated themselves upon the rocky floor, and producing a pack of cards began to play the game of casino.

The occasional glances at the Sparkler he did not notice.

He felt wearied, not having had any sleep for thirty-six hours, and the warmth of the fire soon had the effect of lulling him into a state of repose.

Still the miners played on.

The loud breathing of the sport finally attracted their attention.

He was sleeping soundly, and his face wore a pleasant expression.

Murphy looked at Muggins.

"Why not nab him ag'in, bedad? There'll be a big reward for the loikes av him."

"I was thinkin' the same thing, Pat. But, how would we work it?"

"Easy enough. Swear that Placer Poll kivered us, an' forced us to let him out. Thin we gave chase an' captured him again."

"Good idea! Have ye got any rope?"

"Divil a bit; but I have some wire, an' it's better."

He took some serviceable wrapping wire from his pocket and exhibited it in triumph.

"That will do! Give me a piece. We shall have to go at this carefully!"

Sealskin Sam, however, lay in an admirable position to be captured. His feet were close together and his hands were clasped.

Murphy took the job of fastening his wrists together, while Muggins attended to the feet.

It was a delicate undertaking to accomplish without awakening him, but it was soon done, and the two captors arose and surveyed their work proudly.

"A fat raise we'll make!" Muggins chuckled.

"Faith, an' shure we will," Murphy agreed.

"Hi, there! turn yer back forinst me, mon-tha'er's a worrum a-crawlin' on it!"

Muggins quickly obeyed, having a great horror of vermin species.

It was a fatal action.

Murphy suddenly shoved his revolver against the back of his companion's head and fired.

Uttering a piercing cry, Muggins fell forward upon his face—dead!

The report and cry awakened Sealskin Sam, and finding himself powerless, a glance was sufficient to make him understand the situation.

Murphy dropped the revolver and drew a knife, as he stepped toward the sport.

"There's a reward for the loikes av ye, dead or alive!" he cried, a wolfish glitter in his eyes, "an' begorra, it's not poor I'm goin' to be all me days. You're as slippery as tha divil himself, an' I'll take ye, dead!"

He leaned forward, glaring down into the Sparkler's face, his murderous blade upraised to strike; but at that instant a tremendous black dog leaped into the cave with a savage bark.

"Hero! Thank God!" Sealskin Sam cried.

Murphy wheeled around in alarm as the huge mastiff caught him by the throat, knocking the weapon from his hand.

It was now "good-by" Murphy.

#### CHAPTER XI.

##### A STORY OF THE PAST.

IT now becomes our duty, in the interest of our romance, to go back to a scene at the Selden mansion, which occurred in the mine-owner's private room after he and Bolivar Bullwhack had ascended to that cosey apartment from the parlor, as related in a previous chapter.

The face of the giant was smiling and triumphant; the face of the mine-owner, on the contrary, was scowling and disagreeable, his eyes gleaming, with malignant evil in their depths.

"Well?" he said, pointing out a chair to Bullwhack, and seating himself at a table on which a student-lamp reflected a circle of golden light.

"You have dared to come here! What now?"

Bullwhack took a greasy pouch from his pocket, and filled his mouth with a huge chew of fine-cut, munched away on it awhile, and then squinted one eye and regarded Ebenezer Selden with a speculative stare.

"Theet 'brotherly' racket war purty good, warn't it?" he observed.

"More clever than the most of your actions. You had to make a blunder toward the last!"

"The gal didn't notice it."

"Of course she did. She's no blockhead, you may bet."

"What does she know?" and the giant grinned good-naturedly.

"I have given both her and Sardon a hint, and I think they understand."

"Oh! I allow thar'll be some kickin', but I ken't help it. The time is come, an' it has got to be done!"

Eben compressed his lips grimly.

"In God's name why do you not spare them a little longer?" he gritted.

"Not much. Et ain't my natur'!"

"You needn't tell one of that. Your face betrays your ugliness fast enough."

"If I am any uglier than you I'll eat my shirt. You have grown worse since we met last. Eben, ye old sucker, I want lucre."

"You'll get none from me."

"Oh! won't I? Neow I ain't so sart'in sure about it. I hope ye don't calkylate I've been as still as mice all these fleetin' years, months, days, an' weeks? I've found out a few things about you."

"Bah! what?"

"First, murder. Second, abduction. Third, theft. Fourth, desertion and corruption. Fifth, robbery, and, lastly, a conglomeration of sins that would fill a caterlogue!"

"Pshaw! you've been drinking too much."

"Nary. The fact is, Eben, unless your bank-account is rather bulky yer coil o' cordage aire unwindin' purty near to the end."

Selden lit a stubby clay pipe, tipped back in his chair, and blew a cloud of smoke ceiling-ward.

"Now, look here," he said. "I am a rich and influential man, and you are a ruffianly beggar. Supposing, for instance, I was to refuse you one red cent—what would you, or could you do about it, sir?"

The same triumphant leer was upon the giant's face.

"What c'u'd I do?" he repeated, closing one eye, and aiming a squirt of tobacco-juice at the fire-place. "Waal, that depends. Will ye listen to me all through, ef I tell ye?"

Eben Selden's mood seemed changing from ill-feeling to good-nature.

He arose, went to the door, looked out, came back, and was seated.

"Go ahead!" he said, drawing an extra cloud of smoke from his pipe. "My ears are not of abnormal size, but they are attentive."

Bolivar Bullwhack evidently did not admire the rather cool way the mine-owner had adopted. He gave a sharp glance around the room, as if to see if there were convenient places for eavesdroppers; then, after a moment, he spoke:

"Well, ye seem desirous o' drawin' me out, an' I'm goin' ter let ye draw. Ye needn't interrupt me, more'n to say yes or no, when I require. Recklect, I'm goin' ter tell ye what I know, an' ye needn't try no funny bizness on me, sech as killin' me, fer, I'll tell ye why beforehand. Ye parseeve that I've got my right hand in my right-hand pocket, an' thet aire hand aire clutchin' a 'bull-dog' revolver w'ot aire leveled straight at yer heart, as square as a geograffy. Ef ye try any munk'y bizness wi' yer's truly, Bolivar Bullwhack, I'll apprise ye beforehand that ye get beautifully left."

"Go on!" Selden called out, with a compression of the lips.

"Keerect. Waal, to begin with, it war several years ago when we first met, warn't it?"

"Yes," Selden replied, stolidly.

"We war some years younger than now," Bullwhack pursued. "Thar warn't so many crow's tracks on our faces—not a wart on ther proboscis o' either of us. I reckon we must ha' stepped on toads when we war young, Eben, which accounts for the warts."

"Go on. Come to the head."

"Like a bile on yer neck, eh! Well, hyer goes: It war years ago. We war both young and purty. I hadn't drunk so much bug-juice then, and warn't so big, by long odds, as ye are well aware. Our first acquaintance—let me see—I war trampin' along a country road in Pennsylvania, when I heerd a carriage a-comin'. So I dodged inter a clump o' bushes. What did thet carriage do but come along an' stop in front o' my hidin'-place. Ther' was a man an' woman

in it, an' both were werry la-lah—that is to say, werry upper notch, jedgin' by looks.

"Now, Leonora, ther man said, 'this thing has gone far enough. I want your answer.' He spoke real mad like.

"Luther," answered the gal, "my answer is the same as before—no! I may as well be plain with you. I am engaged to Bartley Bryant. He will take me, and be a protector of my poor dead husband's child, and I am content."

"Ye'r content, airo ye?" Luther growled. "Let me tell ye that your dream is a mockery, then. No one knows of this drive to-day. I am going to kill you, and cheat my rival of his prey. Your child shall follow you, Leonora."

"She put up her hands then, but he did not hesitate. His knife flashed through the air, and Leonora died inmegetly. She war pitched out o' the carriage, an' you—you, Luther, driv' fast away!"

The face of Ebenezer Selden remained stone-like in its composure.

"Go on," he said, with a yawn.

"I found out who ye war, reckonin' mebbe I could salt some hush-money out o' you. Ye war poor, but were likely to inherit a good boodle in due time. I wrote ye what I had seen, but didn't mention givin' ye away. I war content ter wait. The next time I met you war in St. Louis. You war then on the prisoner's dock fer petty theft—an' ye war all broke up, eh?"

Selden nodded.

"You have a keen memory," he admitted, grimly.

"Oh, you bet I hev! My wad war numerous then, so I got ye off at light bail, an' we slid together. You slipped me, tho'—an' I got married. I would 'a' had a good future, mebbe, only, like the snake ye aire, you crept in, an' furst I knew, I war minus a wife. It warn't long. I trailed ye, an' once more found yer hand dipped in blood. Ye had killed her!"

An expression of pain passed over Selden's face.

Bullwhack paid no attention to it.

"An' still I war content," he went on—"all I wanted war ter see ye git rich. I might relate a volumn o' other criminal rackets ye had, but I'll tech only on ther main ones, ter save time. I hunted ye up, an' fer a time we war friends. Ye unfolded ter me a secret. Yer rich uncle war about ter step out, an' ef ye were married an' settled down, an' hed children—at least two—he proposed ter make ye his heir. But nary a chick ner a child did yo hev, an' in yer dilemma ye turned to me. I loaned ye mine, you promisin' ter fetch 'em up ter votin' age in first-class shape."

"Haven't I done it?" Eben Selden hissed, savagely.

"I reck' I haven't seen the boy, but ther gal looks like she might hev jest popped out o' a dress-maker's shop. But, let me go on. When yer uncle ambled off, ye found, ter yer sorrier, that the thing weren't goin' ter sagaciato. He hed left his cool half-a-milyun ter the kids, but it weren't to tech 'em, till the youngest war plum squar' o' age."

Selden drew a long breath.

"The only thing fer you to do were ter hang on ter 'em, an' git hold of the boodle, when they were of age."

"Yes, an' I'll have it!" Selden gritted, fiercely. "I've bided my time, and shall have my reward. Everything is fixed in readiness, and the minute the girl is of age and signs the paper, I am willing you should have your children back."

"Oh, how clever! Wouldn't that be a reg'lar blood-poodin'? When's the girl of age?"

"Soon."

"I ain't fergitful o' that. Yet it aire sum time, too. She lacks a few year yet, Eben."

"That matters not. She is misinformed as to her age. In a couple of days she will be able to swear she is twenty-one."

"Ho! ho! that's yer racket, eh? Waal, I presume I might sp'ile it, eh? But I ain't done wi' my story, yet, Eben. The daughter of Leonora still lives, and knows of your crime, an' has sworn to wreak vengeance on you."

"Bah! am I a baby to fear a weak woman?"

"Maybe not. But, Leonora's gal is not a weak woman. Cast upon the world, her life has been a rough one, an' she has lost the quips an' quirleques of feminine wimmen. She seeks vengeance."

"Let her seek!"

"But she aire in this very camp!"

Eben Selden started.

"You lie!" he gritted.

"If I do, I don't know anything about it!" the giant declared. "She is here, but don't know you."

"Ah!"

"A relief, eh? Waal, I should faint! Ef she knew ye war heer, I opine ther would be blood spilt, somewhat. I ken easily put her on yer track, ef ye want me to."

"You needn't mind!" Selden returned. "Are you done?"

"Not quite. I've another thing or two to say."

"Be brief then."

"I will. What man, of all your enemies, do you fear most?"

"None of them!"

"You don't, eh?"

"I do not fear God, man or devil!"

"Suppose Bartley Bryant war to confront you? How d'ye think ye would feel?"

"I do not think I should quail."

"Waal, you're queer. I should almost shiver my socks off, ef I war you!"

Selden laughed in his old cracked voice. His composure, evidently, was not so great as he assumed.

"Go on!" was his mechanical answer. "Talk me to death if you like."

"I'll try my best Eben. I hev a few remarks ter make consarnin' Bartley Bryant and ther brother of one Sadie Southwell!"

## CHAPTER XII.

### BULLWHACK'S PRICE.

THE face of Eben Selden suddenly changed color, as the giant uttered the last name.

"What!" he gasped. "What do you know about—"

"All!" Bullwhack assured, with one of his peculiar grins—"all, dear Ebenezer. Shall I explain? I might as well, as I see that your memory is very defective.

"To begin with: There was a pleasant leetle home, once upon a time, down among ther pine-clad hills of Nebraska, where dwelt a trio of persons named Southwell. The only living parent was a decrepit old man o' seventy years; then thar war a son an' daughter. The son war a hunter, miner, and so forth, an' kept the family supplied wi' ther necessities o' life; the gal, young, beautiful an' charmin', was the housekeeper. D'ye reckermize the tint o' my Michael-Angelo-like pieter, Eben? Well, a great, an' pompous, an' learned man, gained access to that home, an' courted the girl—dazzled her wi' his pictures o' aristocratic life. A marriage war secretly performed. It war intended to be a mock marriage!"

"Intended!"

Eben Selden gasped in uttering the word.

"Yas, intended, so fur as you aire concerned, Ebenezer, an' ye know it. Scheming old villain that you are, you never intended to make the innocent, trutin' girl your wife!"

"Nor did I" was the fierce answer.

"I'll beg ter tip ye a cross-eyed smile on that. Ye did marry her, an' she an' her child aire yours, an' come in fer yours when you turn up yer toes!"

"It's false as hell itself!"

"Kain't say 'bout that, fer I've never bin there, but ye kin bet on my bein' right. I war watchin' ye them days, an' I war yer evil genius then. When ye hired yer rascally nephew, Larry Lee, to furnish a snide instead of a gini-wine preacher, Larry, dear boy, didn't fill the bill!"

"What?"

"No, sir-ee! A peculiar sort o' inderwidual, named Bollivar Bullwhack, got Larry so b'ilin' drunk he couldn't hev told a minister frum a stone quarry, an' a *real* minister war sent an' did the job!"

Selden's eyes fairly blazed.

"You accursed ruffian—you did this?" he hissed, venomously.

"Waal, I should cough up a cat!" Bullwhack assured—"but I let the sarcus go on. My buble warn't ready ter burst, jest then. Yer children war at college—that is, mine were—an' yo war livin' in clover, you hardened old sinner!"

"Waal, things went on until forthcoming events began to cast their shadows—then ye skipped, Ebenezer, like a guilty son-of-a-gun, leavin' behind ye a letter tellin' her ye war tired o' her—her, the sweetest angel in Nebraska—an' that ther marriage war only a mockery!"

For the first time during his narration, the face of the giant became stern, and he glared at Selden in a way that made the detestable old villain feel very uncomfortable. The mine-owner's usually florid face now showed a shade of pallor.

"Well," Bullwhack went on, "poor Sadie hev come crazed, partly, and fled from her home. Her child was born, and later she was found

perishing upon the prairie. By whom, do you suppose?"

"How do I know?"

"By Bartley Bryant, at that time a ranch-owner in this Territory. She was taken to his home, but was stolen away by Larry Lee, and has not been heard from since. I doubt if Bryant told her her child lived, for he gave it to a person who had once known the Southwells, and from whom he learned of yer perfidy an' Sadie's wrongs!"

"Where is the child?"

"Safe! that's enuff fer ye to know. But, let me go back: Sadie hed another lover, whom she fersuk fer you. Mebbe you hev heard o' him?"

"No!"

"Waal, his name war Walter Bent. After Sadie's disappearance, several o' those who hed knew her got together—Bent, an' her brother, among 'em—an' took a solemn oath never to rest until your death paid their penalty o' yer treatment o' Sadie!"

Ebenezer Selden arose from his chair, and paced the floor, his brows contracted, his eyes wearing a scared look.

"Who are they?" he demanded, fiercely turning toward the giant.

"Waal, Eben, I aire one!"

"You! Bah!"

"I—me, Bollivar Bullwhack, is one."

"Who else?"

"Well, I dunno whether I better let on ter you or not. Guess I will, however. Walter Bent is number two."

"Yes!"

"Gerald Southwell is three."

"Yes."

"Salem Sphinx is four."

The mine-owner started.

"Salem Sphinx, the gambler?" he ejaculated. "Why, I have known him for months!"

"Mebbe. But, very likely, to your sorrow. He and Leonora's gal are after you."

"Oh! Well, go on! Who else?"

"Ther' may be others, but I presume, if so, they aire in the employ of Walter Bent! By the way, however, your most vehement enemy aire here—has been heer for some time!"

Eben Selden looked at the giant searchingly. He then arose, went to a safe in one corner of the room, and presently returned with a roll of bills.

"Who?" he tersely demanded, throwing down a fifty-dollar note before the giant, on the table.

"Bartley Bryant!" Bullwhack answered.

"You, probably, know him as Maurice Clarkson?"

The mine-owner uttered an oath.

"Great God! Colonel Clarkson—impossible!"

"Nary a time, dear Eben! I also see'd a spectable-lookin' chap at the Cremonia, ter-night, from St. Louis. I sized him up, an' reckoned he wanted a feller o' about your size, fer counterfeitin' or somethin' o' the sort, down thar. So yo see that yer bale o' hay aire gittin' reduced purty nigh ter the last spear."

"So it would seem!" Selden replied. "I am not frightened, though!"

"I shed be, ef I war ye. Ef my idears ain't lost their origin, most all yer enemies aire in this hyer very camp o' Hunki-Dori. Clarkson an' Bent both ar' on hand."

"Yes; Bent is here, and in limbo. He is Sealskin Sam!"

"Correct. But he ain't in limbo."

"He is. I saw him locked up just before you honored me with this visit. If he gets out, alive, it will be queer."

"It'll be a durned sight queerer ef he don't git free. He's as slippery as an eel. Who else hev ye tumbled to?"

"No one."

"Thort not. Waal, Leonora's gal aire heer. Bullwhack aire heer. Sealskin aire heer, an' fer what I kno', a couple c' bis confederates. Gerald Southwell, ef not heer, will be, soon, an' yer prospects aire purty thin. Not needfully, tho'. Of all yer enemies, Luther Lee, I am the only one that knows you are not really Ebenezer Selden."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure as that I live this minnit. The man-hunters wot aire after you aire not aware o' the fact that ye live heer. This place, I reckon, war selected fer 'em to meet, an' compare notes."

The man of many crimes did not appear to regard this assertion as reasonable.

"They evidently believe I am in this part of the country, or else they would not hover so close together."

"Possibly ye are right. Ef they don't know ye'r heer, et won't take me long ter tell 'em." Bullwhack suggested. "The fact aire, it's shet.

out or swing wi' you. Ef ye cum down liberal, I kin easy put 'em off ther track. Ef ye don't, why my conshence won't allow yer to escape the vengeance loomin' up fer you."

"That's your game, is it?"

"You bet! I hevn't searched out all these things fer years wi'out expectin' ter git well paid fer doin' it. I c'u'd hev sprung ther trap on ye long ago, but didn't want to. I wanted ye to git rich, so that I could bleed ye. Oh! Lute, me boy, I'm as fly as ye find 'em!"

"I see!" the mine-owner growled. "You've struck the wrong party, however. I'll not give you one copper!"

"Ye won't?"

"You have heard me!"

"Then I wouldnt give two cents fer yer hull carcass!" the giant growled, rising to depart. "I'll leave you now—ye need time ter reflect. My price aire fifty thousand dollars. An' not a stiver less—fifty thousand in cool cash, or up ye go, ye double-dyed-in-the-wool villain!" and Bullwhack backed out of the room, still grasping his revolver in his pocket, ready to draw it on the slightest sign of old Eben's attempt to "get the drop" on him.

The old scoundrel now had good reason to wish the giant silenced!

### CHAPTER XIII.

#### WHO PLACER POLL WAS.

ABOUT noon of the day that followed Seal-skin Sam's escape from the cabin jail, Thede and little Ruth made their appearance in Hunki-Dori, as did also Nicodemus Slambang, and his Teutonic comrade, Jake Schwackhammer.

As may be imagined, their arrival, coming as they did, together, created a lively sensation, as "Gnome," in particular, coming in for the major share of curiosity.

About the first thing the strangely-contrasted quartette did was to adjourn to the hotel, and order a square meal.

After that, Thede and his baby *protege* went forth upon the street, and taking a stand near the Cremonia, the child, in plaintive accents, solicited pennies from the passers-by.

"Please, sir, give me a penny!"

This was the appeal, and was by no means unsuccessful. Pennies and silver, and gold pieces, were dropped into a little tin cup she held, right freely.

Among those who stopped to view the Gnome, and his pretty child, was Ebenezer Selden. He surveyed the man awhile, with evident suspicion, and also feasted his eyes upon the fair face of the little girl.

"By Heaven, there can be no doubt of it!" he mused, turning sharply away. "That young one's face is all the world like that of Sadie Southwell. It is her child and mine! But, what is it doing in the possession of that disguised beggar? Who is he?"

His brows were knitted in a dark scowl. He went straight to the tent where Lije Landers had his quarters, and found that gentleman at home, and also, in his company, the deserter, Larry Lee!

The latter nodded nonchalantly, and surveyed his uncle, interrogatively.

"Good-day to ye, Mr. Selden," Landers said, obsequiously. "What can I do fer you today?"

"A great deal, if you like. Can I see you privately?"

"Oh! don't be afraid to speak out, before me, unky!" Larry Lee said, sarcastically. "I know what you would mention—concerning the disguised beggar and the child!"

"You are unusually brilliant!" Selden sneered. "Who is the fellow?"

"I don't know. The child ought, by rights, to call you papa!"

"I suspected as much!" and a grim look came over the mine-owner's face. "See here, Larry, I've learned something about you. You abducted Sadie, over a year ago. Where is she, now—tell me that?"

"Why do you want to know? D'ye want her back again?"

"No—of course not."

"Well, I'll tell ye. I found her at Bartley Bryant's, and fell in love with her. I tried to persuade her to marry me, but she wouldn't. I abducted her and have held her a prisoner, ever since, determined she should never have her liberty until she married me. But she has at last escaped, and Satan only knows whether I shall ever get possession of her, or not."

"Probably not. I am afraid she and the child will be the means of causing us both trouble."

"Bah! you are a coward."

"I am not. Landers, I want you to go take

that child away from this masked fraud, that's causing so much commotion, and in some indirect way fetch it to me."

"Now?"

"No—after dark. That will be the best time."

"How much is there in it?"

"You can name your price—anything reasonable."

"Well, say five hundred."

"It is a bargain. Make no botch, nor let any one know where you fetch the child."

"Ye can depend on me!" Landers declared. "I ain't no fool."

At about the same time that Eben Selden departed from Landers's tent, Savoy and Sardon left their home, for a stroll up the gulch.

Both were scrupulously attired, and although the day was warm and pleasant, they were well wrapped.

As they sauntered along young Selden said:

"Well, what is it you have to tell me so important, sister?"

"What we have been led to believe, is true:—we are not the children of Eben Selden, but, instead, of a rough overgrown ruffian who calls himself Bollivar Bullwhack."

"How do you know this to be true?"

"By overhearing a conversation between Selden and this giant. The latter is going to expose the fact that we are not Selden's children. Oh! it seems as if I would rather die than suffer the humiliation. How the Clarksons will gloat over our fall!"

"Curse it, I know they will. I've got a bone to pick with Leroy Clarkson!"

"What about?"

"He is getting entirely too thick with Placer Poll!"

"What do you see in that girl, to fancy?"

"A great deal, or else I should not have mar—."

"What? Sardon, what are you talking about?"

The young man flushed and looked guilty.

"Curse the luck, I am always putting my foot in it. I suppose you might as well know the truth. Polly is my wife!"

"Oh! Sardon!"

"It's true, my dear sister—a bitter truth, that cannot be dodged."

"Explain. Tell me all."

"It happened when I was at Harvard. A crowd of us sophs made the acquaintance of a number of girls belonging to a female seminary in a neighboring town. I was struck with this Polly Prescott, and, like a fool, married her. I repented the next minute after doing so and tried to buy her off, but it was no use. She disappeared, finally, and I thought I was rid of her, but when I returned home, here, I found her here in advance of me. Only by keeping her well supplied with money have I been able to keep her quiet."

"This is terrible."

"Worse than that. But in time I may conclude to own her, although I do not believe she cares for me. At all events no one else shall have her!"

At this point they rounded an abrupt bend in the gulch, and came face to face with Leroy and Bertie Clarkson, who had also been out for a stroll, and were returning.

A sudden determination seemed to seize Sardon Selden, for he came to a halt directly in young Clarkson's path.

"See here, my friend!" he said, importantly, "I've got a little advice for you to digest; I don't want to do you personal injury, but I wish to warn you that if I see you paying Placer Poll any further attentions there will be trouble."

"Indeed!" young Clarkson cried, his face flushing. "By what authority do you find it convenient to order me, I should like to know?"

"It matters not—I've warned you, and you had better heed what I say."

"I should be a very practical fool to do anything of the kind. If I want to speak or even make love to Placer Poll, I shall do so without asking your permission."

"You will do so at your peril!"

"Bah! do you think a Clarkson is afraid of a Selden?"

"I'll make you afraid, if you say Jack Robinson!" the young graduate cried, now worked up into a passion. "I'll have you know that I've intended giving you a good thrashing this long time, you puppy!"

"Do it now, you mongrel baboon!"

This was enough. With an infuriated snarl, not unlike that of some beast, Sardon sprung forward and struck Clarkson in the face.

Although staggered, the latter kept upon his feet, and then they clinched in a deadly struggle, whereat Savoy ran forward and began to belabor Leroy; but she, in an instant, was fiercely attacked by Bertie, and thus it was a fierce struggle of brother and sister against brother and sister.

Nor was it destined to end without fatal results.

There were savage cries, the report of weapons in the hands of the two men.

Almost simultaneously with six successive shots, all four fell to the earth.

The first two shots, by chance, had killed the young women—the other four ended the careers of both young men.

When the people, alarmed by the cries and shots, gathered at the spot, it was to behold a sight that filled all minds with horror—the story of which made the most tragic record in the annals of Hunki-Dori's vivid history.

From Landers's tent Eben Selden went directly to the Cremonia.

During the day the establishment was but little frequented, and when the mine-owner entered he found but few people at the tables.

Circe was not present, but soon came in, and at Selden's gesture came and seated herself at the table where he was sitting.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Do you need to ask that?" she said, gazing sharply at her. "I have come for my answer."

"So soon! Why, it's less than a week since you proposed to me."

"It matters not! I am going to leave Hunki-Dori as soon as I can complete arrangements."

"Why?"

"Because it is unsafe for me here."

"Indeed? Have you enemies?"

"More than you imagine. Circe, I love you; I have told you that before; I do not know you except as the masked woman you are. I am content to take you without regard to your past. Will you marry me?"

"I am not prepared to say, Mr. Selden. Marriage is a grave subject for consideration."

"But with me you would be happy. I have riches and you need never want for anything money can secure."

"Bab! riches are nothing. I have all the money I need. The fact is, sir, I do not love you. Were I to marry you, I should never care anything personally for you."

"Are you sure?"

"Perfectly. The only man I ever loved did not reciprocate my affection, and my heart literally turned to stone after that."

"Whom did you love?"

"Your bitter enemy!"

Selden started.

"Who?" he ejaculated.

"The lover of the woman you married, and deserted!"

"Sealskin Sam!"

"The same!"

"Yet you caused his arrest last night."

"Certainly. I would have killed him, had I not been afraid of hanging for it."

Selden regarded her, a fierce light in his eyes.

"Tell me," he said—"were you the wife of the man you came to Hunki-Dori with?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Out of idle curiosity."

"I was Jack Dean's wife. It wasn't a love affair, no more than my union with you would be. It was merely a matter of business."

"Well, are you going to give me a decisive answer?"

"Not just now! I must have time to consider."

"Nonsense! You must certainly know your own mind!"

"I don't so far as concerns this matter. Come around to-night and I will give you my answer. Don't have any hopes, however, for they will be useless, I fear."

"I trust not. I am certainly your equal, and we could retire from active life and live in peace and comfort for the remainder of our days."

"I am not so sure of that. But I will give the matter what consideration it deserves."

Ebenezer Selden arose, his face rigid in its expression of combined apprehension and passion.

"If you don't marry me," he growled, "I'll betray something you don't think I know."

"Will you?"

A steely glitter entered her eyes.

"Yes, I will!"

"And what may that be?"

"The fact that the captain of the notorious

Tribunal of Ten is none other than Mademoiselle of the Cremonia!"

"Ban! I'll dare you to do that!" she hissed. "You, as well as I, belong to the order, and so does your son. You are too shrewd a villain to do anything so dangerous as *that*!"

#### CHAPTER XIV.

REUNITED.

COLONEL MAURICE CLARKSON was locking up his office for the night when he heard hurried footsteps, and gave a careless glance around to see who was passing.

An ejaculation of astonishment escaped his lips; he sprung forward and caught the passing person by the arm.

"Sadie! Good Heaven! can it be possible?" he cried.

The person was a young woman, poorly clad, pale and wan—a mere wreck of evident former beauty. Great suffering and mental torture had left traces both on her face and figure—still it was Sadie, whom Lieutenant Larry Lee had abducted from Crystal Lake more than a year before."

She gave vent to a frightened cry and tried to escape, but the colonel held her as in a grasp of iron.

"Sadie, don't you know me? Be quiet. I am your friend—Bartley Bryant!"

She gave him a quick, searching glance, and then burst into tears.

"Oh! let me go—please let me go!" she gasped, appealingly. "I did not want to meet you here."

"You did not want to meet me, Sadie? Why, what did I ever do that you should not?"

"Oh, sir, please let me go! I am not worthy of your notice—I—I belong to another."

To another? Sadie, you must explain all to me. Come! yonder is my home. You must come with me, and tell me all."

She ceased to sob, but it was with evident reluctance that she accompanied him.

When they were seated in the mine-owner's parlor, a few moments later, Colonel Clarkson took her hand in his, tenderly, and looked pityingly into her sad, wan face.

"Sadie," he said, in a kindly tone, "I want you to be frank with me, and tell me all. I have an inkling of the truth, but am still in the dark. I found you one bleak winter's night, and took you to my home. I brought you back to life, and—grew to love you. Sadie, I knew your life to be shrouded in a mystery, but I felt satisfied I should eventually have you for my wife. Tell me, Sadie, and tell me candidly, why did you fly with Larry Lee?"

"Fly with him, sir? Oh! can it be possible you do not know differently from that?"

"Only by the words you have just uttered. Explain, I pray of you."

"I was abducted, sir. Ever since that night, so long ago, I have been a prisoner in a lonely mountain cave—the prisoner of Larry Lee. But for a chance opportunity, two nights ago, to escape, I would probably have lived and died there. He had sworn never to set me free until I married him."

"By Heaven, this outrage shall not pass unavenged. I never suspected but what you had eloped with him."

"Mr. Bryant, I have a question to ask of you?"

"I anticipate what it is. Your child still lives!"

"God be praised! But why did you tell me different, when you saved my life?"

"I thought, all things considered, it were better you should believe it dead. I gave it to a kind hunter, and afterward to your brother."

There was a brief silence, and then the colonel spoke again:

"Sadie, since the one above has granted that we should meet again, I want to know all. *Luther Lee* was your husband!"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"I found a partly-directed envelope in your room, bearing his name. Tell me about it, Sadie."

She did, relating how Lee had come to her home, wedded her, and then deserted her.

Bartley Bryant, as we shall henceforth call him, listened gravely.

There can be no doubt but what the marriage was legal," he said. "After your disappearance I found your brother and learned all. I also learned that you had had another lover, whom you were not indifferent to."

"Walter Bent?"

"Yes. Your brother, this Bent, and a few others, had sworn to hunt your villainous husband down. Whether they have or not I do not know. It may surprise you to know that, once

before, when I was years younger than now, this same Luther Lee cheated me of a bride, by murdering her!"

"I was told so by Walter Bent."

"Ha! how knew he anything about it? I never knew him."

"He learned, I believe, from the daughter of Leonora, whom he became acquainted with."

"Did he tell you more?"

"No. Larry Lee did, however. He told me that instead of being a single man, as I had believed, you were married, and had two grown-up children."

"This is partly true," Bartley Bryant admitted. "I married a woman who proved in every way my inferior, and, after bearing me my children, went utterly to the bad. Thus was a cloud put upon their lives. I placed them in an Eastern school, and it is, only, since coming here, as Colonel Clarkson, that I have had them with me."

"How strange are the events of a lifetime!" Sadie murmured. "It seems as if we were born for sin and trouble."

"Very true, my dear. And now that our two lives have known so much sorrow, Sadie, why should we not try to seek for more peace and comfort in the future? Don't you think you could be happy with me, Sadie, as my wife?"

"Were it my lot to be so blessed, Mr. Bryant, I should consider myself very, very happy. But, you know it cannot be. If, as you say, my marriage to Luther Lee was a legal one, I am then his wife and cannot wed you, nor any one."

"True, but you can easily get a divorce. And, too, Luther Lee is, probably, at the further corner of the earth."

"Oh! no, sir. *He is here in Hunki-Dori!*"

"What! Luther Lee, here? Impossible!"

"It is, nevertheless, a fact. I learned the fact from Larry Lee, who is his nephew. Luther Lee goes, here, under the assumed name of Selden—Ebenezer Selden!"

"By Heaven, I believe you are right, although it never occurred to me before. Selden cheated me out of a portion of my mining interest here, and since then we have never been on speaking terms. Oh, why did I not know this long ago?"

He arose and paced the floor, a desperate expression upon his face, and a gleam in his eyes, that boded no good to Eben Selden.

Sadie grew pale, for she divined the thoughts that were passing through his mind.

"Oh, sir, I trust you will not do anything rash!" she pleaded, clasping her hands and looking at him appealingly. "Though Eben Selden has wronged us both, no good can come of attacking him."

"Perhaps not. He shall come to a settlement, however, which shall free you, and provide for your child. But, let that matter drop now. You are to remain here, and become mine, as soon as it can be satisfactorily and legally arranged.

"I will hunt up my daughter, make all known to her, and you can rest assured that you will receive a hearty welcome. As soon as I can communicate with your brother I will have your child restored to you, and it shall share our home with us, the same as if it were our own."

"Oh, you are too kind. What have I ever done to merit this treatment at your hands?"

"You have won my affection, and that is all-sufficient to warrant my warmest devotion to your future happiness, my peerless one!" he said raising her hand to his lips.

"Sh! is that you, Nick?"

A figure, wrapped in a dark cloak, stepped from the dark shadow of a cabin, and toward two persons who had paused a few paces away.

"Yo' jest done bet it's me!" was the answer, "an' ef I ain't done off my ker-base, your voice am frummiliar. Is it you, Marse Sam?"

"You bet! alive and kicking, though but for Hero I wouldn't be here to tell you of it. Is that you, Jakey?"

"Dot vas me!" the German responded. "Ve vas yoost vorrying apoud you, Skealskin."

"So? Well, you can dissipate all fears, for I'm here, and here for business. Have you got my papers, Nick?"

"Bet I has, honey!"

"Good! It was well I left them with you, or they would likely have been destroyed when I was captured. I suppose you've heard of the trouble I've had, and there is a reward offered for me?"

"Reckon dar is—suffin' like five hundred thousand dollars!"

"Humph! I never knew I was a person of so much value before. But it don't matter. I've got the game in my own hands, now. There's work to be done to-night, boys, for I'm going to collar onto the Tribunal of Ten!"

"Golly, boss, I done guess dat will take more dan dar is ob us!"

"And there will be more—plenty of help. I have just left the camp of a company of cavalry a mile from here, who are fresh from a successful raid on the mountain stronghold. When I am ready for them, they will pounce down upon this camp and gobble up the prey!"

"But how you vas goin' to find ou'd who der prey vas?" Jakey asked, doubtfully.

"I think I can work that part of it all right!" Sam assumed. "Let me see. The first person I want to see is Placer Poll!"

"And, my dear sir, what might you want of Placer Poll?" a triumphant voice demanded.

They wheeled quickly to behold Lieutenant Larry Lee confronting them, a sardonic smile upon his countenance. In his grasp were a pair of cocked revolvers.

"I don't think you are over anxious to see Placer Poll just yet, are you?" he added, maliciously.

#### CHAPTER XV.

THE SPARKLER PUTS IN HIS WORK.

"WELL, since you have honored us with your obnoxious presence, Larry Lee, I dare say we are not in so much of a hurry!" Sealskin Sam replied, none the less composed for the surprise. "I presume this evening finds you well, Mister Outlaw?"

"Never was in better trim!" Lee assured, blandly. "In fact, I feel in really exuberant spirits since I have so opportunely dropped upon you. My finances are rather at low ebb, at present, and I don't know of any other person I would be more pleased to make five hundred dollars off from than from your charming self."

"Indeed! I am delighted to hear it. But, as it chances, you haven't acquired the requisite capital yet. *Hero* though you be, you haven't scored your point!"

Sharply did the Sparkler utter the word "Hero," but finished the sentence in his ordinary tone.

Little did Larry Lee reckon what sort of a man he had to cope with, nor the significance of the single emphatic utterance.

A dark object moved stealthily out from the shadow of the nearest cabin, approaching the renegade lieutenant in the rear.

It was the great shaggy mastiff who had saved the Sparkler's life in the mountain cave—a brute of wonderful intelligence who, seemingly, comprehended every order and need of his master.

"Ha, ha!" the renegade officer retorted. "If you think I haven't got you, you're off your reckoning! You've got to go with me, or I'll drop ye where you stand, you Government Spy! Oh, I know you. You would play the detective, would you? I guess not, any more. We will cook your goose for you, you hound! So, right about face and march, or I'll plug you where you stand!"

"Will you? *What a Hero! Take him!*"

The detective spoke sharply, and instantly the dog leaped through the air. He struck the lieutenant, and knocked him sprawling to the ground.

Then Sealskin Sam was upon him, and Nick and Jakey, each grasping an arm, wrenched his pistols from his grasp.

"Dat's number one, for shuah!" cried Nick, dancing around like a boy.

"I'll cut your throat, nigger!" gritted the discomfited lieutenant. "I'll—"

Sam's hand was on his throat. It closed with a vise-like grip, and the words ended in a gasp.

"You'll do no more throat-cutting, you vile scoundrel. You and your Satan's crew have got to hang like dogs—do ye hear?"

The man was quiet enough now. He seemed to realize that all was lost, and was utterly unnerved. He was tightly bound, gagged, and then borne out of the camp to a spot at a safe distance, where he would not be discovered. Nick was left to guard him, while the Sparkler and his companion turned their footsteps back toward the spot where the capture had been effected.

Here they unexpectedly encountered Placer Poll.

"You are the very person I wish to see!" Sealskin Sam said. "I've got work for you. You can be of great service to me. Will you lend me your co-operation?"

"In what?"

"Breaking up the Tribunal of Ten."

"You bet! You can count on me every time. What is it you require?"

"Well, I've got to do some scheming to work out all of my plans. Do you think Salem Sphinx is connected with the gang?"

"It has several times occurred to me that such might be the case."

"Well, I want you to decoy him here so we can capture him. I will then force him to tell all he knows. Once I get him in hand he will either tell or die!" and the Sparkler spoke with a fierce decision.

"He may be suspicious and not come."

"Well, we can but try. Go ahead, at any rate, and we'll see the result."

Placer Poll accordingly took her departure, but soon returned.

"I have sent Salem a note to meet me here," she announced.

Sealskin Sam and Jakey accordingly retired behind a cabin.

Ten minutes passed; then footsteps were heard, and Salem Sphinx, the gambler, stood before the girl sport.

"You sent for me?" he said, suspiciously.

"What do you want?"

"I wanted to tell you that I—I—"

"Ah! you have changed your mind?"

"Yes. I have concluded to—to make you my prisoner!" and he found himself suddenly looking into the muzzle of a cocked revolver. "Budge an inch, or make the least outcry, and you are a dead man. Up with your hands in-stanter."

He obeyed with a muttered curse.

"What is the meaning of this nonsense?" he demanded, fiercely.

"It means, Mr. Sphinx, that you are gob-blid!" Sealskin Sam explained, stepping forward. "The fact is, we're goin' ter pull in as pretty a leetle haul of first-water rascals ter-night as were ever caught, an' not wishin' ter find ye in bad company, we concluded to take you first. With your kind permission we will bind you, so you won't go astray."

"Curse you, I know nothing about the out-laws. I protest against this outrage."

"Et won't do you a particle of good, Salem. We ain't goin' to hurt ye. We want ye ter give us a few pointers in regard to ther personnel of the organization, an' appear ag'in' 'em at the trial, for all o' which the Government will, no doubt, be duly appreciative by granting you a pardon! Will ye now let me bind ye? or shall Polly have to quiet you wi' an extract of lead, which aire very soothin' to the brain."

"Go ahead. It's nothin' you'll make by this. I don't know anything about the outlaw gang."

"How George Washington would blush for you, if he were here wi' his hatchet," the Sparkler said, as he and Jakey securely bound the gambler's hands behind his back. "There, now, you march down the gulch a short distance. There we'll start a fire to toast your feet a little, believing that heat applied to the lower extremities is conducive to relaxation of the jaws," Sam explained.

"Ye needn't mind trying that—I'll cave, you bet," the gambler cried out hastily. "What d'ye want to know?"

"Ah! now you're getting down more like it. Where is the local rendezvous of the gang?"

"In the cellar, under the Cremonia."

"Ah! How is it reached?"

"By rear door opening into a back anteroom."

"Who is the captain of the gang?"

"Mademoiselle Circe."

"Hal! I thought as much! Who are the others—the principal ones first?"

"The original ten members were Circe, Eben Selden, George Miles, Henry Cortello, Lije Landers, Phil Philips, and myself and three others, now dead. Later, Sardon Selden and Larry Lee were admitted, and a branch gang started in the mountains, commanded by Doc Devere."

"How many members are there now in Hunki-Dori, besides those you have mentioned?"

"About a dozen."

He then gave the names.

Sealskin Sam, now fully advised, soon had all his plans matured for the nocturnal attack.

He then sent Jakey Schwackhammer to notify the soldiers to join him as soon as possible.

Ebenezer Selden, alias Luther Lee, sat in his private room, an ominous scowl upon his worried face as he brooded over the past and present of his sinful career.

"Something seems to tell me that matters are narrowing down," he muttered. "That Bullwhack was pretty near right when he insinuated that my reel of rope was nearly unwound. I've a premonition that there will be a smash-up of the band that will betray the members to death. I'll swear they shall not catch me in it. I will fly. I have money enough to carry me through this life, by throwing away the mine. Yonder safe contains two hundred and fifty thousand

dollars, all in greenbacks, and what more do I want?"

"None, I'll swear, onless ye aire a damed fool!" a voice cried, and the mine-owner uttered an oath when he saw the giant, Bollivar Bullwhack, standing just within the room, with a revolver in his grasp.

"You hyer?" he gasped.

"Waal, I should say I am—I, Bollivar Bullwhack, ther bumstifferous bouncer from Bullion. I aire heer, beloved Lute—ga-loot—an' I'm arter spondulics! Ther's goin' ter be ther devil raised in this town ter-night, an' hyer's w'ot aire goin' ter slope while ther' is time, you bet! Before I go, I want yer leetle wad!"

"You'll not get a cent!"

"If you don't open that safe fer me, I'll riddle ye wi' bullets," the giant declared, savagely.

"You shall not have the mouey."

"Then hyer ye go. One! two!"

He was about to utter "three," and fire, when another pistol-report was heard and the giant staggered, clutched at the region of his heart, and fell to the floor, dead.

At the same instant another person stepped into the room.

It was Mademoiselle Circe!

#### CHAPTER XVI.

THE VILLAIN'S COIL OF CORDAGE UNWOUND.

"You here?" he gasped. "Your arrival was opportune."

"Do you think so?" Circe cried, in a strange voice. "I suppose you would have allowed him to shoot you, rather than to hand over the money?"

"No, no! I was about to cry for quarter."

"Oh! were you? I suppose, then, if I were to demand your money, you would give it over without a murmur!"

He did not answer her.

"I don't want the money," she said, with a bitter laugh. "It belongs to your deserted wife and child. They shall have it!"

"They shall not!" he gritted, fiercely.

"You will find out! They are legally your heirs, and after your death you won't be likely to binder them from obtaining their rights."

"I am not dead yet!"

"You are hovering near the grim portals, however. Luther Lee, I have come here for one sole and only purpose. Do you know what it is?"

"How should I know? Who are you?"

"Your bitterest enemy on earth!" and she leveled the revolver, which had been instrumental in taking Bullwhack's life, at the mine-owner.

"Now, sir, do you know who I am?"

She tore the mask from her face, and stood gazing at him with flashing eyes.

A beautiful face was hers, indeed, but in its expression of bitter passion, now, it was a tigerish sort of beauty.

"Great God! where have I seen that face before? Who are you, woman? Speak!"

"I am Beatrice, the daughter of Leonora, whom you foully murdered. I have waited all these years to avenge my mother's death, and the time has at last arrived. Your life shall pay the forfeit of your ruffianly crime, years ago!"

She took deliberate aim at him and fired—not once, but six times in succession, and until he had pitched from his chair to the floor, bleeding and lifeless.

Then with a mad laugh, she turned and fled from the house.

Her life mission of vengeance had been completed. Luther Lee had paid the penalty of his crimes, so far as this world was concerned.

Elijah Landers, the Vigilante of Hunki-Dori, entered the Cremonia Saloon at precisely nine o'clock.

He had come to fulfill his agreement with Eben Selden, little suspecting that, at that moment, the mine-owner lay stark and stiff in death.

Thede, the Gnome, had not ceased to be a curiosity. He sat at a table, holding little Ruth on his knee, and allowed the crowd to stare at him or drop money into the tin cup at their pleasure.

Landers spied him, and strode up to him.

"See hyer, my Christyum friend, I wanter know whose child that aire you hev got?" he said.

"It's my child!" was the prompt and fearless answer. "What business is it of yours whose child it is?"

"Waal, I'll mighty quick show ye what business it is o' mine. I'm ther agent o' ther Society fer ther Purtection o' Chil'ren in this town, and

I hes orders to take that gal away from ye, as ye hev stolen it."

"It will take a somewhat bulkier man than you to do it!" the masked man cried. "The child belongs to me, and I intend to keep her."

"Not much ye won't! Orders is orders! Ef ye don't give it up, I'll shoot you!"

He drew a revolver and cocked it; but before he could use it, it was wrenched from his hand, and he received a blow beside the head that laid him out senseless.

"Sealskin Sam!" came a chorus of cries, and weapons were drawn.

It was the Sparkler, attired as he had been the previous evening, who had knocked Lije Landers down.

"Ay! Sealskin Sam" he cried. "What are you going to do about it?"

"We're goin' to riddle ye, ef ye don't surrender!" yelled back several.

"Stop! Do not dare to fire upon this man!" a stranger cried, stepping forward—the same heavy-bearded party who had watched the Sparkler so keenly the night before. "I forbid it."

"An' who aire you?" yelled back the crowd.

"I, gentlemen, am the Governor of Washington Territory, and this Sealskin Sam, as he calls himself, is under my protection. He is one of our most trusted detectives!"

Sam turned to the dignitary and bowed.

"Thank you, governor, but I am not in need of your protection in this instance. This place is surrounded by a full company of cavalry, and any one attempting to leave here without my permission will be shot down!"

He then gave a sharp whistle, and a dozen soldiers filed into the room.

"What is the meaning of this?" Circe loudly exclaimed, sweeping forward.

"It means that I want you and the rest of your confederates!" the Sparkler replied. "You have no other choice but to surrender. Sphinx has given you all up, and you are cornered. Resistance can only bring you death!"

"Then death it shall be! Boys, fight your way out!"

With a yell the ruffians began firing, but it was a futile attempt. The soldiers picked them off with terrible precision, until there was a cry for quarter and a surrender.

But little remains to be added to our tale.

The breaking up of the desperado band cleared the vicinity of its outlaw element, and that rich region was opened to peaceful settlement and vigorous development.

The Gnome, when unmasked, as unmask he did after the downfall of the Tribunal was assured, proved to be Gerald Southwell, the brother of Sadie. The disguise had been assumed the better to expedite his mission, which was to search for Eben Selden, or Luther Lee, and for lost Sadie.

At the governor's orders, the cavalry set out the next day for the capital, taking with them such survivors of the fight as Salem Sphinx charged with being members of the band.

Heavy sentences were imposed at their trials—Mlle. Circe alone escaping, by some hocus-pocus that quite baffled the authorities.

Gerald Southwell was reunited to his sister, and little Ruth took up her future home in the Bryant mansion.

A claim was filed by Sadie to Luther Lee's wealth, and it was allowed; and in due time, after a period of mourning, Bartley Bryant took her for his wife.

After seeing his sister happily settled, Gerald Southwell went East, and is still there, engaged in a lucrative business.

Sealskin Sam found his former love for Sadie overshadowed by a stronger and prouder affection for the spirited and much-wronged Placer Poll, and when their acquaintance became more intimate, Polly told him the story of her past life, and consented to be his wife.

They still continue prominent detective-lights in the far Northwest, where they have a justly-acquired fame as the "Sparklers."

Larry Lee was tried with the other prisoners, and by court-martial was sentenced with them to State's Prison, and was also expelled from the U. S. Army in disgrace.

Nicodemus Slamtang wedded big Suse, the Seldens' servant, and Jakey Schwackhammer runs the Cremonia, at Hunki-Dori. The elegant saloon being left without an owner, Jakey was installed as host by suggestion of Sealskin Sam, and under his honest sway it soon ceased to be a rendezvous for the roughs and toughs of the mine. And as Circe has not "put in an appearance," Jakey still "holds the fort."

THE END.

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